READING LIST · FREE RESOURCE

Reading List: Product Leadership in the AI Era

24 books for product leaders, grouped by the problem they help with: strategy, positioning, discovery, operating models, systems and data, and AI. Each comes with a note on when it is worth your time.

By **Ratomir Jovanovic** · ratomir.com/resources/reading-list-product-leadership

This list is for product leaders, founders and senior PMs who want a short, deliberate set of books rather than an endless shelf. It is grouped by the problem each book helps with, so you can pick the next one based on what is in front of you this quarter, not on what is popular.

The outcome is a reading plan you can actually finish. Twenty-four books is still a lot, and nobody should read them in order. Most readers will get the most value from four to six of them in a given year, chosen because they match a real decision the reader is facing.

How to use this

1. Write down the two or three hardest problems you face this quarter: a strategy question, a team structure problem, a technical constraint, an AI decision.
2. Find the group that matches each problem and read the "Read it when" column. Pick one book per problem.
3. Read with a question in mind. Keep one page of notes per book: the two or three ideas you will use, and where.
4. Share the most useful idea with your team within a week. If you cannot explain it simply, read that chapter again.
5. Use the PDF guide as a printable version of this list with space for notes against each book.

Product strategy and leadership

These books cover what strategy is, what product leaders are actually responsible for, and how senior managers spend their time.

Book	Author	Read it when
Inspired	Marty Cagan	You need a shared vocabulary for how strong product teams work, or you are onboarding PMs who came from project management.
Empowered	Marty Cagan with Chris Jones	You lead product managers and want teams that own outcomes rather than deliver feature lists.

Book	Author	Read it when
Good Strategy Bad Strategy	Richard Rumelt	Your strategy reads like a list of goals. Rumelt's diagnosis, guiding policy and coherent actions is the most useful structure for writing a real one.
Playing to Win	A.G. Lafley and Roger L. Martin	You need to frame strategy as a set of linked choices: where to play and how to win.
High Output Management	Andrew S. Grove	You have moved from managing a team to managing managers, and your calendar no longer reflects what matters.

Positioning and focus

Many product problems are positioning problems in disguise. These books help you decide who the product is for and what to leave out.

Book	Author	Read it when
Obviously Awesome	April Dunford	Prospects do not understand what you sell, or sales and marketing describe the product differently. The method is practical enough to run as a workshop.
Crossing the Chasm	Geoffrey A. Moore	You have early adopters but struggle to win mainstream buyers in a specific segment.
Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind	Al Ries and Jack Trout	You want the original argument for owning a clear position in the buyer's mind. Old examples, durable idea.
Essentialism	Greg McKeown	Your roadmap and your own week are both too full, and saying no has become harder than it should be.

Building and discovery

These books cover how to learn what customers need before building, and how to keep doing it as the company grows.

Book	Author	Read it when
The Mom Test	Rob Fitzpatrick	Your customer interviews produce polite enthusiasm and no useful evidence. Short enough to give every PM and founder.
Continuous Discovery Habits	Teresa Torres	You want discovery to be a weekly habit rather than a project, with a clear way to connect opportunities to outcomes.
The Lean Startup	Eric Ries	You are testing a new product or business line and need a disciplined way to run experiments.
Competing Against Luck	Clayton M. Christensen, Taddy Hall, Karen Dillon and David S. Duncan	You want to understand why customers switch, using the jobs-to-be-done lens.

Book	Author	Read it when
Escaping the Build Trap	Melissa Perri	The organization measures output, ships a lot, and cannot say what changed for customers.

Organizations and operating models

Strategy fails in the gaps between teams. These books help you design structures and practices that let teams deliver.

Book	Author	Read it when
Team Topologies	Matthew Skelton and Manuel Pais	Teams wait on each other constantly, or you are planning a reorganization and want team boundaries that match the architecture.
Accelerate	Nicole Forsgren, Jez Humble and Gene Kim	You need evidence-based measures of software delivery performance and a shared language with engineering leadership.
An Elegant Puzzle	Will Larson	You work closely with engineering management and want to understand how they think about team sizing, planning and technical debt.

Systems, architecture and data

Product leaders do not need to design systems, but they need to understand the constraints and trade-offs behind them, and to reason about metrics carefully.

Book	Author	Read it when
Designing Data-Intensive Applications	Martin Kleppmann	Your product depends on data correctness, scale or reliability, and you want to hold an informed conversation with architects. Read selected chapters, not cover to cover.
Thinking in Systems	Donella H. Meadows	Fixes keep producing new problems, and you want a way to see feedback loops in markets, teams and products.
Lean Analytics	Alistair Croll and Benjamin Yoskovitz	You need to choose the one metric that matters for your stage and business model, and stop reporting vanity numbers.

AI and technology

These books help product leaders reason about where AI creates value, how AI systems are built, and how to work with AI tools day to day.

Book	Author	Read it when
Prediction Machines	Ajay Agrawal, Joshua Gans and Avi Goldfarb	You need an economic frame for AI decisions: what gets cheaper when prediction gets cheaper, and where human judgment still matters.

Book	Author	Read it when
Co-Intelligence	Ethan Mollick	You want a practical, non-technical view of working alongside AI tools, for yourself and your team.
Designing Machine Learning Systems	Chip Huyen	Your product includes machine learning in production and you want to understand data, training, deployment and monitoring trade-offs.
AI Engineering	Chip Huyen	You are building products on top of foundation models and need to understand evaluation, retrieval, fine-tuning and cost decisions.

How to choose between books in the same group

Within each group, the books do different jobs. A few patterns help when you can only read one.

Diagnosis before method. If you are not sure what the problem is, start with the book that helps you diagnose it (Good Strategy Bad Strategy, Thinking in Systems, Escaping the Build Trap) before the one that gives you a process.

Short before long. The Mom Test and Obviously Awesome can be read in a weekend and applied on Monday. Designing Data-Intensive Applications and Accelerate reward slower reading. When time is short, pick the book you will finish.

Shared reading beats solo reading. Some books are more valuable when the whole team reads them: The Mom Test for anyone who talks to customers, Team Topologies for a leadership team planning a reorganization, Inspired for a new product team. Assign a chapter, then spend thirty minutes discussing how it applies to your situation.

Read the AI books against your own product. The AI books are most useful when you keep a specific feature or workflow in mind while reading. Ask, chapter by chapter, what it means for that feature: where the model's predictions are good enough, how you would evaluate them, and what it costs to run.

Worked example: a reading plan for a new CPO

This example is hypothetical. A newly appointed CPO at a B2B SaaS company has three problems in the first two quarters. The product has grown into several loosely related modules, and sales cannot explain why customers should buy the platform rather than one module. Engineering teams are organized by technical layer, so most features need three teams to ship. The board has asked for an AI plan.

The CPO picks one book per problem. For positioning, Obviously Awesome, read in a week and turned into a half-day workshop with sales, marketing and product. For structure, Team Topologies, read alongside the CTO, with each of them marking the chapters that describe their current pain. For the AI plan, Prediction Machines first to frame where AI changes the economics of the product, then selected chapters of AI Engineering to understand evaluation and cost before committing to specific features.

In the second quarter, once the team structure changes are under way, the CPO gives The Mom Test to every PM and designer and adds Continuous Discovery Habits for the product leads. Good Strategy Bad Strategy is kept for the annual planning cycle, when the strategy document is rewritten.

Six books in two quarters, each tied to a decision. That is a realistic pace for a senior leader with a full calendar.

Common mistakes

Reading for coverage instead of use. Finishing a book is not the goal. One idea applied well is worth more than ten books summarized.

Adopting a framework wholesale. Every author describes what worked in specific contexts. Take what fits your stage, market and team, and be explicit about what you are leaving out.

Quoting books at your team. Telling engineers what a book says rarely changes behavior. Showing how an idea solves a problem they already feel usually does.

Reading only product books. Many of the most useful books here are about strategy, systems and organizations. Product leadership is mostly about those things.

Treating AI reading as optional. Senior product leaders are now expected to make informed decisions about AI features, costs and risks. A basic understanding of how these systems are built and evaluated is part of the job.

Relying on summaries. AI and book summaries capture the headline idea and lose the reasoning, examples and caveats that make it usable. Use them to decide what to read, not instead of reading.

When not to use this

This list is not a substitute for talking to customers, reading your own data or learning from people who have solved your exact problem. If you face an urgent decision, a conversation with an experienced operator will help more than a book. It is also deliberately general: if you work in a specialized domain such as payments, healthcare or regulated finance, add the standards, regulations and domain texts that apply to you, because none of these books will teach you those. And if you are already overloaded, read nothing new this month. Come back to the list when you have a specific question to answer.

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