A Founder Reading List for Systems Thinking, Learning, and AI Policy

Recommended Reading from Tech Founders

2026-07-25

A Founder Reading List for Systems Thinking, Learning, and AI Policy

By Recommended Reading from Tech Founders • July 25, 2026

Patrick Collison's standout technology history pick leads a set of founder-recommended books on bottlenecks, management, learning, and judgment. The brief also includes two directly linked readings on AI openness and the political economy of technology adoption.

Most compelling: *The Dream Machine* — Mitchell Waldrop

- **Content type:** Book
- **Link:** No direct book URL was supplied. Source interview
- **Recommended by:** Patrick Collison
- **Key takeaway:** A biography of J. C. R. Licklider and an account of the intellectual environment, disciplines, and events that led toward ARPANET and the internet. Collison values Waldrop's unusually deep treatment of both the people and ideas involved. [1]
- **Why it matters:** This is the day's strongest recommendation because Collison bought multiple copies to give to Stripe colleagues and friends after reading it—an unusually concrete endorsement of a technology-history resource. [1]

Books for understanding and improving systems

The Goal — Eliyahu Goldratt

- **Content type:** Business novel / management book
- **Link:** No direct book URL was supplied. Source interview
- **Recommended by:** Kevin Systrom

- **Key takeaway:** Goldratt's manufacturing and supply-chain thesis is that a system's slowest process constrains its output. Systrom applied that lens at Instagram: unresolved important decisions could become a bottleneck, with ideas accumulating in front of them. [2]
- **Why it matters:** It offers a specific translation from operations theory to company decision-making: find the constraint that is holding back the rest of the work.

The Lean Startup — Eric Ries

- **Content type:** Business / startup book
- **Link:** No direct book URL was supplied. Source interview
- **Recommended by:** Kevin Systrom
- **Key takeaway:** Systrom and Instagram co-founder Mike Krieger read it early; its instruction to "do the simple thing first" became Instagram's second value and remains a principle Systrom uses. [2]
- **Why it matters:** This is a recommendation with direct operating evidence: the idea was adopted as a company value, rather than merely admired in theory.

The Box — Marc Levinson

- **Content type:** History / economics book
- **Link:** No direct book URL was supplied. Source interview
- **Recommended by:** Tobi Lütke
- **Key takeaway:** Lütke chose the book while seeking a fuller understanding of the logistics networks behind Shopify's commerce activity. He found a clear historical divide before and after the shipping container, then used that inflection point to explore the people involved. [3]
- **Why it matters:** It models topic-driven learning: start with a business dependency you do not understand, then trace the system and its history back to its formative change.

High Output Management — Andy Grove

- **Content type:** Management book
- **Link:** No direct book URL was supplied. Source interview
- **Recommended by:** Tobi Lütke
- **Key takeaway:** Lütke calls it one of the best books ever. He values its first-principles treatment of business and its framing of building a business as an engineering exercise. [3]
- **Why it matters:** For technically oriented operators, it provides a management frame that connects business work to an engineering mindset.

Learning, feedback, and judgment

How to Read a Book **— Mortimer Adler**

- **Content type:** Nonfiction reading guide
- **Link:** No direct book URL was supplied. Source interview
- **Recommended by:** Kevin Systrom
- **Key takeaway:** For nonfiction, Systrom highlights Adler's approach of first studying the table of contents and structure, skimming for the main arguments, and reading chapter-ending paragraphs before returning to a conventional read. [2]
- **Why it matters:** It is a practical method for approaching a book with an understanding of its overall argument rather than discovering that structure only as you go.

Mindset **— Carol Dweck**

- **Content type:** Psychology / personal-development book
- **Link:** No direct book URL was supplied. Source interview
- **Recommended by:** Tobi Lütke
- **Key takeaway:** Lütke calls it the best source on growth mindset. He has seen readers recognize areas where they held a fixed mindset; he also sees the book as useful for leaders trying to identify fixed-mindset language in direct reports. [3]
- **Why it matters:** The recommendation goes beyond individual motivation, positioning mindset awareness as a practical leadership and coaching tool.

The Inner Game of Tennis **— Timothy Gallwey**

- **Content type:** Sports psychology book
- **Link:** No direct book URL was supplied. Source interview
- **Recommended by:** Patrick Collison
- **Key takeaway:** Collison recommends it in the context of continual feedback, course correction, and questioning whether apparently irreversible decisions are truly so. [1]
- **Why it matters:** It is presented as a transferable model for learning through observation and adjustment, not only as a tennis book.

Influence **— Robert Cialdini**

- **Content type:** Psychology / persuasion book
- **Link:** No direct book URL was supplied. Source interview
- **Recommended by:** Tobi Lütke
- **Key takeaway:** Lütke describes it as a mind-bending account of human flaws and susceptibility to influence. It helped him recognize that making things for people requires attention to storytelling and framing, not only predictable systems. [3]

- **Why it matters:** It addresses a gap that technical builders can face: understanding the human side of products and communication.

Bird by Bird — Anne Lamott

- **Content type:** Writing book
- **Link:** No direct book URL was supplied. Source interview
- **Recommended by:** Scott Belsky
- **Key takeaway:** Belsky calls it one of his absolute favorites and gives it widely, including to startup founders. He draws out lessons on progressing toward a destination when only a limited distance ahead is visible, and on building patience into a team. [4]
- **Why it matters:** The recommendation makes a case for a writing book as a resource for founders navigating uncertain, incremental work.

Principles — Ray Dalio

- **Content type:** Business / life guide
- **Link:** No direct book URL was supplied. Source interview
- **Recommended by:** Kevin Systrom
- **Key takeaway:** Systrom often gives the book to people who are actively trying to learn. After first encountering its PDF and later reading the book, he describes it as a guide to life and business and says he was "blown away." [2]
- **Why it matters:** It is a high-conviction gift recommendation from a founder who sees value in both its business and personal perspectives.

History and policy lenses

How Asia Works — Joe Studwell

- **Content type:** Economic-development book
- **Link:** No direct book URL was supplied. Source interview
- **Recommended by:** Patrick Collison
- **Key takeaway:** The book examines why South Korea, Taiwan, China, and Vietnam diverged economically from countries including the Philippines and Indonesia. Collison summarizes its proposed factors as land reform, protected but internationally competitive industrial and export sectors, and tight consumer-credit controls. [1]
- **Why it matters:** It is a focused resource for readers investigating comparative development rather than treating national economic outcomes as self-explanatory.

Open Weights and American AI Leadership

- **Content type:** Paper / public letter
- **Author/creator:** Not identified in the supplied material

- **Link:** Read the paper [5]
- **Recommended by:** Martin Casado
- **Key takeaway:** Casado welcomed broad acknowledgement of the need for open weights and stated that they are key to security, research, innovation, and competition. [6]
- **Why it matters:** It is a direct source for the case linking open-weight AI to several policy and ecosystem objectives, rather than a secondhand summary of that argument.

***Are you afraid of the Luddites?* — Julia Willemyns**

- **Content type:** Essay
- **Link:** Read the essay [7]
- **Recommended by:** Garry Tan
- **Key takeaway:** Tan highlighted the essay's claim that the pace at which countries adopted technology over the past 200 years accounts for at least 25% of the difference in why some nations are rich today. [8]

  > "How fast a country adopted new technology over the last 200 years accounts for at least 25% of why some nations are rich and others aren't today." [8]

- **Why it matters:** The essay offers a historical frame for current AI debates by connecting technology adoption speed to long-run national outcomes.

Sources

1. #353: Patrick Collison — CEO of Stripe
2. #369: Kevin Systrom — Tactics, Books, and the Path to a Billion Users
3. #359: Tobi Lütke — From Snowboard Shop to Billion-Dollar Company
4. #336: Scott Belsky — How to Conquer the Messy Middle
5. X post by @JensenHuang
6. X post by @martin_casado
7. X post by @jujulemons
8. X post by @garrytan