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An Introduction to Business Reading Groups

On Your Mark. Get Set. Read: An introduction to business reading groups and their impact on professional development

People who read at least seven business books a year earn a reported 2.3 times more than people who read only one. That stat, floating around the Internet, has been attributed jointly (and separately) to the U.S. Department of Labor and a survey by Yahoo! ¹

Whether that information is strictly reliable or not, executives and avid readers everywhere will attest to the value of professional reading—for personal development, leadership training, continuous learning and company innovation.

Publishers are responding with books that speak to career advancement and fulfillment, as well as business tomes that read more like a VanityFair feature than an academic textbook; because, blue-suit executives aren't the only ones reading business books.

Our notion of what exactly constitutes a "business book" has changed, and so too has the readership. Case in point, when McGraw-Hill published "A Thousand Barrels a Second," about the oil industry, in January 2009, author Peter Tertzakian landed on Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show" on Comedy Central. ²

Why did an economics book land on one of America's top-watched comedy shows? For the same reason Malcom Gladwell's books sit side-by-side the latest novel on booksellers' 'staff choice' shelves and why "Freakonomics" has spent more than two years on the "New York Times Bestseller List"—we have become a business-savvy (and news hungry) culture.

The lines between our personal lives and our work lives have blurred, and entertainment shows like "The Apprentice" and "Shark Tank" have ramped up our economic-fluency. We can also thank very public business scandals—like Martha Stewart's insider trading and the Enron collapse—for our expanding interest in all things corporate. Not to mention, of course, increased interest due to the very real personal impact of an economic decline.

¹ No author. Various Web pages including BusinessSummaries.com.

² Danford, Natalie. "Cool, Inc." *Publishers Weekly*. 24 Apr. 2006. Web. 26 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6327025.html>>.



"In one way or another," said Hollis Heimbouch, associate publisher and editorial director of Harvard Business School Press, "everyone is involved in some aspect of organizational life—whether it is managing a staff of 20, leading a community organization or learning to manage oneself more effectively."³

Enter the reading group ...

Charles Decker was perhaps one of the early trend-spotters to detect democratization in the business book readership. He believed companies would benefit if employees at all staff levels would sit down and discuss a relevant book together.

"We literally had senior executives on the same page with secretaries," he recalled. "No pun intended."

In 1995, Decker was running the Executive Book Club—a sales outfit, similar to the Book of the Month Club. As a book seller, he explained, you needed to manage your inventory. If you had too many books you couldn't sell, they had to be destroyed.

So Decker will readily admit that it was a money play when he started advocating for professional reading groups. (That and the natural reluctance any ardent reader has to destroying perfectly good books.)

Decker launched his program by offering 15 copies of a single book—for free—to anyone willing to start a reading group.

"The first round was on us," he said. "That was the theme."

Decker saw about 100 groups form after taking advantage of his initial offer. He kept in touch with several and even visited a few. Once, at a conference, he shared an elevator with the president of a large insurance company who had taken advantage of his free book offer.

"He said, 'Aren't you the guy that offered to give us books? That has been such a success for us. I've never see any other program that worked so well at involving people from all areas of the organization,'" Decker remembered. "It's a wonderful way to create dialogue and it's very cost effective."

Later, Decker moved on to Amazon.com where he built the Amazon at Work page and created a section for bulk orders.

³ Danford, Natalie. "Cool, Inc." *Publishers Weekly*. 24 Apr. 2006. Web. 26 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6327025.html>>.



"It was a movement, at this point, that we were calling business literacy," he said.

In 2003, Decker furthered the cause as a freelance journalist for Fast Company, where he launched the Reader's Choice column. Each month the magazine would present several recent releases and ask readers to go online and vote for their favorite. That would be the book Decker would review in depth in the next issue.

But to be included in the Fast Company feature, authors or publishers had to commit to providing discussion questions the magazine could post online. Discussion, Decker felt, was critical.

"I really believe that people who read books not only learn a lot, but having conversations is critical to solving the world's problems," he said. "Discussion questions help people have a directed conversation."



Decker also believes that employee reading groups can do far more than advance someone's professional development. He believes reading groups have the potential to improve morale and productivity.

"It often enables people to say, in a fairly neutral setting, things they are concerned about," he explained. "People can make their concerns known without being singled out as a complainer."

Decker has seen companies use all sorts of formats and schedules to conduct internal reading groups. One large farming equipment manufacturer, he remembered, was having online discussion from three different locations. After a while the company flew them together for a joint meeting, so they could meet face to face.

In other companies, he's seen groups tackle a chapter a week, opening staff meetings with relevant discussion.

Today Decker is a publishing consultant and business author himself, with titles such as "Lessons from the Hive and Beans: Four Principles for Running a Business in Good Times or Bad" to his name. "People just have to try it," he said, of launching discussion groups. "I think what happens very easily is that the dialogue level is raised and communication among coworkers is enhanced. People just become more comfortable talking to one another, and that's a powerful thing."

Creating leaders

At Shive-Hattery, an architectural engineering and consulting firm, President Tom Hayden is a big proponent of business literacy. In 1995, he designed a leadership program for his company, heavily based on reading and discussion. That program is still active today.

“We looked around and realized we didn’t have enough leadership talent,” Hayden said. “We had quite a bit of management talent, but not leadership. Leaders produce change,” he explained. “Managers produce predictable, consistent results.”

In Hayden’s company, employees held degrees as architects and engineers. “They got all the math and science, but they didn’t get any education about how to lead people, how to create change in an organization,” Hayden said. “This builds the leadership skills at a faster rate than what they would do on their own.”

Shive-Hattery has offices throughout Iowa, Illinois and Missouri. The leadership classes are small, four to ten participants, carefully selected from different Shive-Hattery offices. Each quarter participants read three books and a number of articles dealing with topics like leadership, professionalism and management.

Then they convene for face-to-face discussion over a two-day conference with Hayden and other executives. Participants spend a significant amount of time reviewing the reading, although additional issues may be added to the agenda.

“Frankly I use them as a sounding board for issues, and through the process they get to be involved in helping me make decisions relative to the company,” Hayden said.

Years ago, participants would remain in the program for two to four years. Today each class lasts anywhere from 12 to 18 months. As of fall 2009, the company had three groups running—a large commitment for Hayden, who facilitates each one.

A key component of the program is that participants are required to buy their own books.

“We want them to build their own personal library,” Hayden said, a library that participants have invested their own money in and will keep them, throughout their career. “I want to get the message across that it’s okay to go to a bookstore and buy something that will advance your career.”

It’s working too. Hayden says that a program graduates continue to read and sometimes suggest books for new classes. Plus, he can see first hand the difference it makes in participants’ actions.



“It’s kind of amazing how the light bulbs go on. We read a book and start talking about it in the context of Shive-Hattery, and the stories come out,” he said. “We see how their perspective changes as a result of the reading and discussion we have. They would have gone the wrong direction if not for the efforts of the group.”

Hayden says he’s aware of other companies who have begun reading programs. “But they don’t spend the time talking about it,” he said, “which is just terribly important.”

Program Standbys at Shive-Hattery

“A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs From Management”

– John Kotter

“True Professionalism: The Courage to Care About Your People, Your Clients, and Your Career” – David Maister

“Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies”

– Jim Collins and Jerry Porras

“The Discipline of Teams: A Mindwork-Workbook for Delivering Small Group Performance” – Jon Katzenbach and Doug Smith

“Aligning the Stars: How to Succeed When Professionals Drive Results”

– Jay Lorsch and Thomas Tierney

“Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence” – Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee

“Death by Meeting: A Leadership Fable About Solving the Most Painful Problem in Business” – Patrick Lencioni

“Mintzberg on Management” – Henry Mintzberg

Hayden also selects articles from publications such as “Harvard Business Review,” “MIT Sloan Management Review” and Leader to Leader Institute’s “Leader to Leader” Journal.

For the business community at large

For small businesses and motivated professionals, internal company reading groups aren’t always an option. That’s led several organizations around the country to start community-based discussions, focused on business issues.

Melynda DeCarlo and Tammy Rogers are cofounders of the Meyvn Group, a leadership advisory firm in Des Moines, Iowa. As longtime advocates of professional reading, it’s not surprising that a business book was the trigger that led DeCarlo and Rogers to start the Business Book Club (BBC), a reading group in their own community.

The triggering book in question was “Tribes,” by marketing guru Seth Godin, a prolific author with celebrity status in business circles. “It talked about building a movement

and creating a community,” said DeCarlo. “That resonated with us. Our goal was to get leaders reading.”

To that end, the partners launched a six-month reading series in April 2009. Discussions were held over the noon hour and were open to anyone who wanted to attend, with no cost beyond the price of lunch.

Response was overwhelmingly positive, with as many as 30 to 50 people at each session. Participants were broken into smaller discussion groups while DeCarlo and Rogers facilitated.

“Our intention was to introduce the book and give them the opportunity to connect with other business professionals,” said DeCarlo.

What’s more, the partners provided all participants with handouts they could use back at work with employees or team members.

“In this economy people have dramatically decreased their training budget,” DeCarlo said. “We wanted to teach them it’s as inexpensive as buying a book on Amazon. You can use books to introduce new concepts and incubate ideas.”

DeCarlo and Rogers are in the process of surveying participants and planning for 2010. Early feedback, however, suggests that people would like to read more books, but space the meetings further apart.

When choosing books, DeCarlo and Rogers look for variety, including some easier reads, some academic texts, and some local or regional authors when possible.

Because the program was free, DeCarlo said people were generous about spreading the word. In addition to standard marketing tools, like flyers in coffeehouses and notices in the business paper, the best promotional method she said, was social media.

“We then asked people how they heard about us, a minimum of 38%, and later as high as 50%, saw us on LinkedIn or Twitter,” DeCarlo said.

Members of the book club’s LinkedInSM group not only receive reminders of upcoming meetings, but DeCarlo and Rogers provide other relevant reading news, such as new book releases, throughout the year.



Coordinating the program takes a fair amount of effort, but the Meyvn Group is inspired to continue. "The Go-Giver," one of the books on their 2009 slate, spoke to approaching business from the idea of abundance, rather than a scarcity mentality.

"That has really driven our business this year," said DeCarlo. "Giving, with no expectations in return." That said, they've found the program as been a solid lead generator. "There's been a tremendous amount of reciprocity in what we're doing here," DeCarlo said, "although that wasn't our intention."

Business Book Club's 2009 Choices

"Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us" – Seth Godin

"Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die" – Chip Heath and Dan Heath

"Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool's Guide to Surviving with Grace" – Gordon MacKenzie

"The Carrot Principle: How the Best Managers Use Recognition to Engage Their People, Retain Talent, and Accelerate Performance" – Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton

"The Art of the Woo: Using Strategic Persuasion to Sell Your Ideas" – Richard Shell and Mario Moussa

"The Go-Giver: A Little Story About a Powerful Business Idea" – Bob Burg and John David Mann

View related presentations www.slideshare.net/tkrogers or visit SlideShare and search for Meyvn Group.

Deep dive networking

Meanwhile in Asheville, North Carolina, Diana Kostigen started a reading group to overcome her fear of networking.

"I do not love to network," said Kostigen, who had been working with a business coach to overcome her hang-up. A discussion group felt like a way she could meet local business people without fear of standing alone at an after-hours event or making banal chitchat over the hors d'oeuvre table.

Kostigen is president of Pegasus Image Design, an advertising agency. She launched the reading group in 2009.

Though the group is new, it's getting attendance of 10 to 12 people per session, and Kostigen is pleased with the turnout. It's an ideal discussion group size, she explains. "The more people you have, the less you can focus on each individual person."

Like the Des Moines group, Kostigen uses a mix of traditional and social media to advertise the function, including a group on LinkedIn.

She secured sponsorship from her local Wine Premier store, where events are held. She keeps the setting casual and the process informal. No RSVPs required, and Kostigen herself supplies homemade desserts for every function.

In keeping with the casual format, Kostigen makes it clear that participants don't actually have to read the book to attend. "Based on group discussion, people can get a lot of good information," she said.

She is always ready to facilitate, highlighting some key concepts and keeping discussion questions at the ready, but Kostigen said discussion can take on a life of its own. "Sometimes they'll take control and get in these in-depth discussions."

Asheville Business Book Club 2009 Choices

"How the Red Wolf Found its Howl: The Internal Journal to Leadership"

– Jonathon Flaum

"The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It" – Michael Gerber

"The Invisible Touch: The Four Keys to Modern Marketing" – Harry Beckwith

Intergenerational insight

The Asheville group isn't the only program with a "you don't have to read the book" mentality. That's the standing rule in Green Bay, Wisconsin where freelancer writer Jaime Leick coordinates "Read to Lead," a professional reading group through the chamber.

"You can still have valuable conversations, even if everyone hasn't read the book," Leick said. "Once people understand the message, they can easily jump in with examples and lessons learned from their own workplaces."

While officially sponsored by Current, the chamber's young professional group, participation is open to all community members—any generation, chamber members or not.

"I think the intergenerational conversation adds a lot to our events," Leick said. "There's a lot of cross-learning that goes on."



Leick recruits an area CEO or other top executive to lead each session. That means beyond discussing and learning from the book, participants get a chance to sit down in an intimate setting with one of the area's top business leaders. Leick says certain executives would naturally draw a big group, and after crowds in excess of 35 people showed up for select events, the program had to begin requesting RSVPs in 2009.

"I think about 15 people is really ideal for a book discussion," Leick said. "Too many and the facilitator really has to go into presentation mode. Now we limit it to 25, but I'm still glad when we get less."

Discussions are held after work, and the reading series generally runs from September through April. "Here in Wisconsin, spring networking events don't always go over well," Leick said. "If it's discussion night, but we're having 50 degree weather after months of snow, I can count on a small turnout. That's a lesson we learned quick."

Leick said location challenges have been another learning experience. The group meets in one location all year, and then switches to a new venue the following, to provide exposure to different businesses. "The coffee shop was too loud, with the bean grinders and espresso machines running. Same goes for the local pub. That didn't work when the bar got busy." Now the group meets in a restaurant's private meeting space, provided at no cost by a chamber member.



As for marketing, Leick says chamber sponsorship has proved invaluable. "They take care of all the marketing and the press releases, so I don't have to worry much about driving attendance."

In its first five seasons, Leick focused on finding notable discussion leaders first and asked them choose the books—as long as the selection had something to do with leadership or professional development. She expects to tweak that process for the 2010/11 season, creating a slate of books based on member feedback.

"It's time to try something different," she said. "We're getting the classics, but not a lot of the popular, mainstream, new releases. And members are asking us to push beyond our standard leadership criteria to include economics, social issues and current events."

2005-2010 Sample Selection from Read to Lead

"The SPEED of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything"

– Stephen Covey

"The 360 Degree Leader: Developing Your Influence from Anywhere in the Organization" – John Maxwell

"Let My People Go Surfing: The Education of a Reluctant Businessman"

– Yvon Chouinard

"The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference"

– Malcolm Gladwell

"The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century"

– Thomas Friedman

"Now, Discover Your Strengths" – Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton

"Less is More: How Great Companies Use Productivity as a Competitive Tool In Business" – Jason Jennings

"Failing Forward: Turning Mistakes Into Stepping Stone for Success"

– John Maxwell

"Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity" – David Allen

"Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything"

– Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner

"The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You"

– John Maxwell

"The Servant: A Simple Story About the True Essence of Leadership" – James Hunter

"Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't"

– Jim Collins

"Live First, Work Second" – Rebecca Ryan, Sandy Wight and Firepower Design

"Never Eat Alone: And Other Secrets to Success, One Relationship at a Time"

– Keith Ferrazzi and Tahl Raz

"Raving Fans: A Revolutionary Approach to Customer Service"

– Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles

"How Full is Your Bucket?: Positive Strategies for Work and Life"

– Tom Rath and Donald Clifton

"A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future"

– Daniel Pink

"The Power of Nice: How to Conquer the Business World With Kindness"

– Linda Kaplan Thaler and Robin Koval



Getting started

Although Decker's "Fast Company" column is now defunct, his [guidelines for creating a business reading group](#) can still be found online.

Decker's tips include gathering a group of 10 to 12 members so you can be assured of at least six to eight participants each meeting. Groups, he suggests, should meet at least once a month, same time and day.

As for member responsibilities, Decker says those guidelines should be hashed out at the first meeting. Unlike the Asheville and Green Bay groups, Decker suggests the first responsibility should be to actually read the book. Also discuss issues of schedule, participation expectations, guests, any cost sharing issues, and whether you will take turns facilitating discussion.

Facilitators are clearly in charge of identifying themes and discussion topics and encouraging dialogue from all participants.

Perhaps one of the biggest questions any new group will face is how to choose the book selections. In a company-sponsored group, leadership will often want to dictate those choices. Even in community-based groups, as Kostigen found in Asheville, someone may need to take charge and be the final decision maker. An obvious alternative is a monthly rotation that allows each member to select the book. A variation on that, however, is to ask each member, in turn, to bring a small selection of choices from which the group will choose.

Note, however, that some would-be participants may need more than a month to get through a book, particularly since business texts are often densely packed with information. For the programs in Green Bay and Des Moines, coordinators publish the full season of selections at the beginning of the year, giving community members time to plan their reading schedules.

On your own

If launching a community reading group isn't your thing and interest among your coworkers is weak, seek out online opportunities for analysis and discussion. Book discussions are popping up in blog formats and on TwitterSM.

But, no matter how you proceed, make an effort to engage in the discussion and be an active participant.

"There's an old saw," said Shive-Hattery president Tom Hayden, "I'll remember a small percent of what I hear, and a larger percent of what I read, and a much larger percent of what I talk about."

