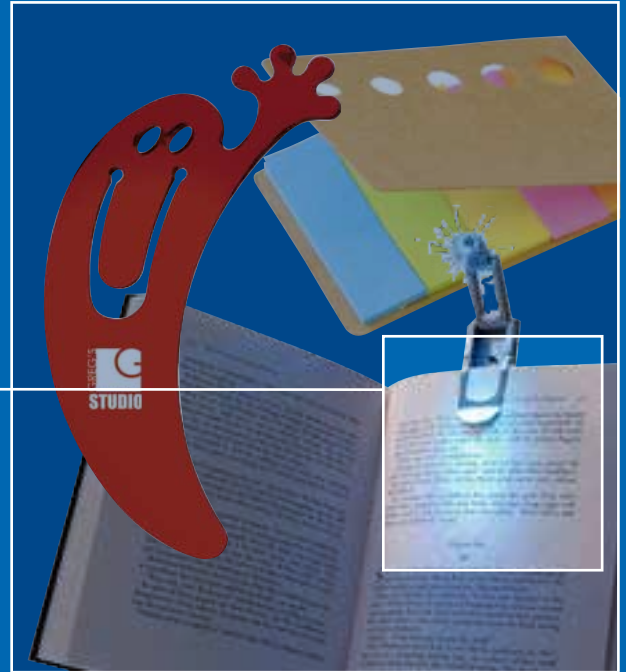


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# Professional Reading for Personal Development

# On Your Marks. 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 statistic, floating around the Internet, has been attributed jointly to a survey by Yahoo!<sup>1</sup> and the United States Department of Labor.

Whether the figure 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 specifically covering topics such as career advancement and fulfillment, as well as business tomes that read more like a monthly magazine feature than an academic textbook; because corporate executives aren't the only ones reading business books.

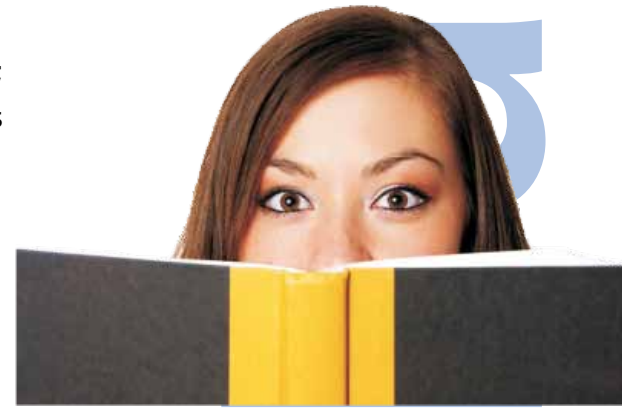
Our notion of what exactly constitutes a "business book" has changed, and so too has the readership. As an example, when McGraw-Hill published "A Thousand Barrels a Second," in the U.S., about the oil industry, author Peter Tertzakian appeared on Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show" on Comedy Central.<sup>2</sup>

Why did an economics book end up 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 and working lives have blurred, and entertainment shows like "The Apprentice" and "Dragons Den" have increased our economic-awareness. 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.

<sup>1</sup> No author. Various Web pages including [BusinessSummaries.com](http://BusinessSummaries.com).

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



Business  
Readers

"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 organisational life—whether it is managing a staff of 20, leading a community organisation or learning to manage oneself more effectively."<sup>3</sup>

## Enter the reading group ...

Charles Decker was one of the early trend-spotters who detected a democratisation in the readership of business books. He believed companies would benefit if employees at all levels could 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 he was financially motivated when he started advocating for professional reading groups.

Decker launched his programme 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 a lift with the president of a large insurance company who had taken advantage of his free book offer.

"He said, 'Aren't you the guy who offered to give us books? That has been such a success for us. I've never see any other programme that worked so well at involving people from all areas of the organisation,'" 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 pages and created a section for bulk orders.



<sup>3</sup> 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 favourite. The book selected would be the one that Decker reviewed 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 learn a lot, but having conversations is critical to solving the world's problems," he said. "Discussion questions help people to 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 raise, in a fairly neutral setting, things that 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 manufacturing company ran the group virtually using online discussions from three different locations. After a while the company flew group members together for a joint meeting, so they could meet face to face.

In other companies, he's seen groups tackle a chapter a week, which they then use to open 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 between co-workers is enhanced. People just become more comfortable talking to one another, and that's a very powerful thing."

## Creating leaders

At Shive-Hattery, an American architectural engineering and consulting firm, President Tom Hayden is a big advocate of business literacy. In 1995, he designed a leadership

programme for the company, heavily based on reading and discussion. That programme is still active today.

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

In Hayden’s company, employees held degrees as architects and engineers. “They had studied all the maths and science, but they didn’t learn anything about how to lead people, how to create change in an organisation,” Hayden said. “This programme builds the leadership skills at a faster rate than the participants could do on their own.”

Shive-Hattery has offices across three states. The leadership classes are small, four to ten participants, carefully selected from different 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 relevant to the company,” Hayden said.

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

A key component of the programme 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 with them, throughout their career. “I want to get the message across that it’s okay to go to a book shop and buy something that will advance your career.”

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



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Re-iterating Charles Decker's views, Hayden says he's aware of other companies who have begun reading programmes. "But they don't spend the time talking about it," he said, "which is just terribly important."

## 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 organisations 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 the United States. 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 trigger was the book "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."

So the pair launched a six-month reading series with discussions held over the lunch hour and 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."

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 programme 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.

Whilst co-ordinating the programme takes a fair amount of effort, the Meyvn Group is inspired to continue. "The Go-Giver," one of the books they discussed talks about 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 specific expectations in return." That said, they've found the programme has 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 initial intention."

**Books reviewed by the Business Book Club include**

*"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](http://www.slideshare.net/tkrogers) or visit [SlideShare](http://SlideShare) and search for Meyvn Group.

## Deep dive networking

Meanwhile one business woman, Diana Kostigen started a reading group to overcome her fear of networking.

"I do not enjoy networking," 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 and she launched

the reading group in 2009.

The group regularly attracts 10 to 12 people per session, and Kositgen 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."

She secured sponsorship from a local retailer, where events are held. She keeps the setting casual and the process informal. No RSVPs required, and Kostigen 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."

## Intergenerational insight

Kositgen's isn't the only programme with a "you don't have to read the book" mentality. That's the standing rule at "Read to Lead," a professional reading group run through the chamber.

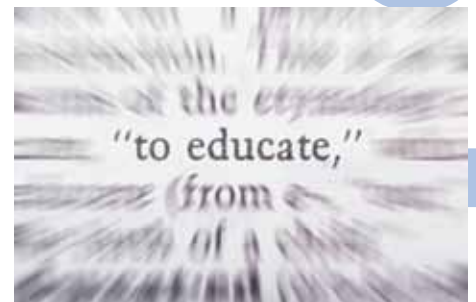
"You can still have valuable conversations, even if not everyone has read the book," Says Jaime Leick, the group's co-ordinator. "Once people understand the message, they can easily jump in with examples and lessons learned from their own workplaces."

While officially sponsored by 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 appoints 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.

"I think about 15 people is 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 to April.

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 group currently 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 next season, creating a choice 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."

## 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 sure of at least 6 to 8 participants each meeting. Groups, he suggests, should meet at least once a month at the same time and on the same day of the week.

As for member responsibilities, Decker says those guidelines should be agreed at the first meeting. Unlike some groups, Decker suggests that the first responsibility of members should be to actually read the book. Also discuss items such as a schedule, participation expectations, guests, any cost sharing issues, and whether you will take turns facilitating discussion.

Perhaps one of the biggest questions any new group will face is how to choose the book selections. In a company-sponsored group, leadership may want to dictate those choices. Even in community-based groups, as Kostigen found, someone needs 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.

A great source of inspiration for current reading is the Management Today website where you will find book reviews by MT staff and guest reviewers from the business world as well as their excellent 'Three of a Kind' column. Three books are reviewed with the same theme such as 'Get Your Creative Juices Flowing' and then rated as 'Best of its kind', 'Could be useful', 'Of minor interest' or 'Avoid'.

Note, however, that some would-be participants may need more than a month to get through a book, particularly as there is often a lot of information to take in.

## On your own

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

No matter how you proceed, make an effort to engage in the discussion, be an active participant and remember: leaders are readers!



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