

A Guide to Workplace Reading Groups

In her book, *In the Age of the Smart Machine*, Shoshana Zuboff writes, "Learning is the new form of labor." I agree. Organizations need to find ways for their people to learn together effectively in order to thrive in the twenty-first century. Establishing workplace reading groups is a simple activity that can pay big dividends.

Here are six suggestions to get your workplace reading group off to a good start.

Choose The Participants

The most successful reading groups are made up of teams that already work together on a regular basis. If you are part of a team-based reading group, you'll be able to choose books and work on things that address a common concern, teach a critical skill, or provide needed inspiration. With a little practice, your discussions will take the theory and examples from the book and apply them to the real issues you face every day.

When you are choosing participants especially for a reading group, look for people with common problems. Without a common bond, discussions are apt to lack focus and get off track. Allow time for a newly created group to get acquainted during the first session.

Choose The Time and Space

Think forty-five minutes and food! Early morning breakfasts or lunches are perfect times to meet, eat, and talk. Some organizations provide the food; others encourage people to bring a bag lunch. Establish a consistent meeting time so the group members can plan their schedules.

Although the presence of food makes it tempting to plan meetings in the company cafeteria or break room, they're not your best choice. Your reading group needs to talk and listen, so your space needs to provide quiet, privacy, and comfortable seating. A small conference room that could be earmarked for your reading groups would be perfect.

Choose The Leader

At the beginning, one person should be assigned the role of leader. By the time the group has worked through several books, you will find that sharing the leadership role is a great idea. Participants can take turns being the leader chapter by chapter or by book.

Choose a leader who is excited about the idea of a reading group. The best leaders understand that they need to do their homework, share their enthusiasm, and facilitate the discussion.

Choose The Book

Deciding what to read first is the most critical part of establishing a successful reading group. Most people will get excited if the book you choose will help them solve a pressing problem. In addition to finding the right subject, you need to find the right *kind* of book. Books that have worked well share a few characteristics.

- Short is better than long (especially in the beginning)
- Practical is better than theoretical
- Conversational writing style is better than stilted prose
- Examples, checklists, and activities are better than footnotes

Sources for book ideas are plentiful. Ask the reading group members for suggestions. Spend an hour in the business section of your local bookstore. Ask a librarian what books are frequently checked out on your subject. Read the book reviews in your trade magazines. Ask your peers and friends for the titles they've been reading. Keep your eyes and ears open because there are always books being published especially for business reading groups. C. Leslie Charles' book, *The Customer Service Companion*, has a Study Guide that makes the leader's role much easier. I'm part of a group that produces a series called *Breaking the Rules*. My contribution, *Silence Isn't Golden: How To Unleash the Real Power of Feedback*,

like the others in the series, gives a specific assignment at the end of each chapter. Terry Paulson's wonderful book, *They Shoot Managers Don't They*, has questions and keepers at the end of each chapter that make finding discussion topics easy. As you approach the end of your first book, assign the task of finding your next project to a few of the reading group members.

Choose The Process

Everyone has a copy of the book, you have a place and regular time to meet, and the leader is ready for your first session. Take the time to talk about why the group has formed and make introductions. If you're already a team, talk about why you've chosen to learn together and the benefits of doing so. During your discussion, cover the issue of an occasionally missed meeting. One effective way to deal with absent members is the buddy system. If you miss a session, it is your responsibility to connect with your buddy and catch up. Once you've taken care of the warm-up issues, decide how you'll read together.

Here are two ways to read together. If the book consists of short chapters you can read the chapter aloud during your meeting and then discuss the ideas presented. If, however, the chapters are longer you probably need to read independently and use your meeting time for discussion. Each session should end up with a two part assignment: what you're going to read for the next meeting and what new behavior or technique you're going to try because of what you've learned. After your first meeting, the opening part of each session should be devoted to how the members have used what they learned from the last reading.

The leader should prepare a few questions to start things off. Here are some generic questions that could work:

- Where did you apply what we learned last week?
- How did it work?
- What was the most important idea you got from this chapter?
- Did you disagree with the author anywhere?

Choose The Next Step

When you finish a book, take the time to learn something about how you learned. Here's a short list of questions you can use for a quick evaluation.

- What was the best thing you've learned from this process?
- How much has your knowledge of this subject improved?
- How much have your skills around this subject improved?
- What would you do differently when you read the next book?

The final question is: Do you want to read together again? I hope the answer is a resounding YES!

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