

STARTING A BUSINESS BOOK CLUB

Good books challenge. They inspire. They push our boundaries and help us become more than we ever thought possible.

In 500 BC Confucius said “No matter how busy you may think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance.” Warren Buffett, one of the wealthiest men in the world, attributes his success to reading. And not to be left out, Dr. Seuss once wrote, “The more you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you will go.”



Common sense tells us that reading is important – but so does the research. In 2008 Elaine L. Chao, the U.S. Labor Department Secretary, disclosed that business people who read at least seven business books a year earn 230% more than people that read only one book a year. Maybe that’s one of the reasons business book clubs are on the rise!

And somehow the experience is not complete until you’ve shared your thoughts with someone else that has read the book.

book conversations improve recall and retention by 70% (Glaser, R. 1983).

Book discussions are not only fun and interesting – research tells us that businesspeople who read at least seven business books a year earn 230% more than their peers that read only one book a year. Maybe that’s one of the reasons business book clubs are on the rise. When professionals get together to discuss a book they:

- Improve relationships
- Engage in powerful conversations
- Invest in their own professional development
- Challenge assumptions
- Clarify their thinking
- Expand their networks

This guide will answer many of the questions you might have as you start your own business book club.

- Group Size
- Finding Participants
- Keeping Participants
- Frequency of Meetings
- When to Meet
- Where to Meet
- Member Responsibilities
- Facilitator Responsibilities
- Potential Book Club Questions

Group Size

Typically, a group of six to ten will have an interesting conversation. The group is small enough for everyone to participate. And it's big enough for the group to have diverse perspectives – which tends to lead to more spirited conversations.

There is no reason however, to limit your group to ten participants. Remember – attendance is not mandatory. People are busy. Some books may be more appealing than others. And work has a way of taking priority. So consider opening up your membership and asking people to RSVP. Even if 30 people showed up – you could always divide them into 3 small groups and allow each group to take the discussion where it leads them.

Finding Participants

Within Your Organization:

Don't expect a bulk e-mail message about a reading group to be greeted with a lot of enthusiasm on its own. If you really want to make this work, take the time to ask your peers to join. Ask your peers to ask others to join. Talk with people from other departments – ask them to join. Identify high-potential individuals – ask them to join. Think about people you'd like to meet and interact with – ask them to join.



Notice that in every instance – we're suggesting you "ask someone to join." Since you're not trying to attract hundreds of people – that act of asking will have the biggest return on investment. And be sure to continue to ask. Ask until you find 12 or more people that are interested. That way – even with no-shows you'll have a good-sized group.

In Your Community: Use social media to your advantage. [Tweet](#) your message. Post the event on [LinkedIn](#). Share the books in [Shelfari](#). Use [Facebook](#). Talk about the book club in your blog.

Then ask family members, friends, neighbors, colleagues, members of professional associations to which you belong, colleagues in other organizations in your field, members of your church or synagogue, or members of other types of groups to participate. Once again – personal invitations work best!

Keeping Participants

1. Don't ask for a long-term commitment. Allow people to attend on a book-by-book basis.
2. Choose the first book very carefully. If people are already talking about the book, if the book is relatively easy to read and if the book has enough content that makes it interesting to talk about – people will have a good first experience. The group's reputation will then drive interest and participation.
3. Build participation into the design. A good book invites conversation. The best way to kill a book club is to TELL people what they SHOULD have gotten out of the book. Let them talk.
4. Keep it short. Plan for an hour and end the meeting on time. If people want to stay and continue their conversations – let them. You'd rather have them make the decision to extend their stay – then force them to commit to 90 minutes or more.
5. Do your homework and be prepared. That means read the book and come with a point of views and questions you'd like to explore.
6. Recognize contributions. Support diverse points of view. Encourage dialogue. And don't let a select few dominate the conversation.
7. Ask for input. At a minimum, ask the group:
 - What's working?
 - What would make it even better?
 - What books they would like to read?



Frequency of Meetings

While you may be an avid reader an Associated Press-Ipsos poll says that 25% of the population did not read a single book last year. That means a good portion of the people you interact with on a daily basis haven't picked up a Twilight novel let alone tackled a business best seller. With that in mind:

1. Hold your meetings on a monthly basis. A month will give most people the time they need to read the book. More than a month will provide people with an excuse to put off their reading.
2. Don't expect everyone to jump on the bandwagon to read 12 books this year. For some people – if they read one or two books in a year that will be an achievement worth celebrating.
3. Consider reading three books in a quarter. If people are interested in reading more – add another quarter's worth of books.

When to Meet

The best time to get a group of professionals together is first thing in the morning or over a lunch hour. Work often gets in the way of 5PM meetings and working parents have children to pick up before 6PM.

Where to Meet

That depends. Obviously if you've organized a company discussion group – meet on site in a conference room. If however, you've recruited people from a multitude of organizations – choose a location that is easily located, where you can meet consistently and where parking is easy.

Suggestions include:

- Churches, synagogues, etc.
- Library meeting rooms
- Community center meeting rooms
- Bookstore meeting rooms

Avoid:

- Public places
- Coffee shops

Member Responsibilities

It is always helpful to have a common understanding of what it means to be a member. We would recommend the following:

Read the Book.

It's okay if you haven't read the book word for word – or if you skimmed the last couple of chapters – but make a significant effort to actually read it!

Show Up.

100% attendance isn't realistic for most people – but if people don't attend there is no discussion.

Participate.

The discussion is only as interesting as the people participating make it. A good rule of thumb is to ask people to come prepared with a point of view and things they would like to discuss.

Demonstrate Respect.

Respect means:

- Being open to new ideas
- Listening even when you disagree.
- Making enough space for others to participate.
- Tactfully challenging the status quo.
- Being prepared.
- Showing up.
- Being on time.



Facilitator Responsibilities

Someone needs to be responsible for facilitating the conversations – and we suggest that person be you! Why? Obviously you're interested in starting a business book club – otherwise you wouldn't be reading this. So you're probably willing to do the work to ensure that the book club is interesting and well attended. Here are some recommendations for making your job easier:

Read the book.

Underline the passages that are most interesting to you – whether or not you agree with them. Jot down your first reactions.

Download discussion guides from the internet.

Many business authors are posting discussion questions online. Another good place to look is at www.slideshare.com.

Set up a communication system.

For instance create a [LinkedIn Group](#). That way you can send one message to reach all of the book club members.

LinkedIn also has a survey function that is very beneficial for collecting opinions.

Send out reminders.

Using a provocative statement can do wonders. Try something like: "I can't wait to hear what everyone thinks about chapter seven. I know that the author challenged my thinking."

Let Go.

Facilitators often think they have to have all of the answers and spend their time talking. That can't be further from the truth! A masterful facilitator comes prepared with 3 – 4 stimulating questions. Facilitators ask a question and then allow the team to take over and do the work. When the conversation dies down the facilitator asks another question. Three to four questions are more than enough for a 60 minute conversation.

If your group is large create sub groups. Put the questions on index cards in the middle of the table and allow each sub group to facilitate their own conversations. Take the last 10 minutes to have each group share something their table talked about.



Potential Book Discussion Questions

It can get very boring if the group ends up answering the same questions month after month. As everyone knows, variety is the spice of life. But sometimes people think they don't have time to put something new together.

That's no longer the case. There are so many resources on the internet. All you need to do is pick and choose. Go to the [University of Google](#). You'll find author interviews, discussion guides, slide shows and presentations – all ready to go. And if you are not familiar with facilitation techniques check out the [International Association of Facilitators](#). IAF has a how-to list that includes more than 500 facilitation techniques – and it's FREE.

But let's say you've run out of time. Below you'll find 15 questions that you can use with any book.

1. What was your favorite quote/line/paragraph from the book?
2. What idea shifted your thinking?
3. Tell us about your "aha" moment.
4. What surprised you the most?
5. What was helpful to you? Why?
6. What did you find confusing?
7. Would you recommend this book to others? Why or Why not?
8. What were your favorite chapters? Why?
9. What was one of your most insightful moments?
10. If you had a chance to meet the author what questions would you ask him/her?
11. How does this book compare with your actual experience?
12. What points do you strongly agree with?
13. What points do you strongly disagree with?
14. Share one of the take-a-ways you will remember most from this book
15. Which principles/ideas/recommendations have you implemented?