

### The Problem

Despite billions spent on training programs, workers rarely retain learnings from them.

# Plot

# Twist

### Why It Matters

Leaders feel employees today lack many of the skill sets they need.

### The Solution

Book clubs and reading lists to engage more workers.

Frustrated with corporate-training programs, some **firms are handing out reading lists** to workers. Will this open a new chapter in skill building? *By Arianne Cohen*

# Now

**E**rin Eaton's semester began with a reading list and a pile of assignments. She and her cohort plotted out their study schedules. "I was all for anything that would help me learn the language and get me on board," she says. She pulled a book off her stack and dug in.

Except Eaton wasn't in school. She was the marketing associate at Scholar Financial Advising, a high-net-worth financial consultancy in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. On the day in question, she and her colleagues arrived at work to find a stack of books on their desks. Eaton wasn't sure where to start, until the company's chief operating officer pointed her to *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win* by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin (2015), a gripping narrative of high-stakes success. Eaton bought the audiobook and listened to life-and-death scenes from the Battle of Ramadi during her commute, finishing long before the staff retreat that discussed concepts like "decentralized command" (empowering juniors to make decisions) and "cover and

move" (working together toward a common goal). To her surprise, she found that the book put her "on the same operational map" with her colleagues.

Old-school reading lists are the last strategy anyone would expect to show up in corporate America in 2025—the year that Gen AI has captured the business world. Yet a small but growing number of firms are taking this very retro approach to training. And when you look at how corporate training is faring these days, the shift starts to make some sense. Billions are spent on workplace trainings, yet a remarkable 70 percent fail to produce the intended business outcomes or behaviors, according to data from the Association for Talent Development. Other studies suggest that participants in such trainings remember as little as 10 to 20 percent of what they've been taught, and that they virtually never apply the relevant knowledge successfully. Trainings have become, to put it mildly, a colossal waste of money.

Can asking people to crack open books really work? To be sure, employees who spend their free time looking at Instagram and text messages are not necessarily

thrilled to hit the books. Who wants to be assigned to read *Moby-Dick* as an overtime activity? One of Eaton's coworkers whispered to her, "I don't want to go home and sit and read." Her response: Get the audio version. But still, the return to such an ancient strategy, in the age of the smart phone, is the stuff of—well, a good novel.

**F**or nearly a century, business books reigned supreme as the communication medium of choice between experts and their supplicants. Popular titles became national phenomena in the 1930s: blockbuster titles like Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) and Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* (1937) have, according to some sources, sold over 110 million copies combined since their publications. In the years that followed, executives published their hard-won lessons at a steady clip, aiming to burnish their reputations and spike their speaking fees. The phenomenon perhaps reached peak popularity in the 1980s, just as globalization was baffling longtime managers. Books provided the appearance of answers: *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* by Robert H. Waterman Jr. and Tom Peters appeared in 1982, demystifying what, exactly, to do at work (their advice: walk around as a form of management and be biased toward action). It was shortly followed by Robert B. Cialdini's *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (1984) and Stephen R. Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal*

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*Change* (1989), the latter of which has sold over 40 million copies.

Even the dot-com boom couldn't stop the book boom: The topics of bestselling business books merely shifted—from nuts-and-bolts to more abstract concepts. Titles like *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't* by Jim Collins (2001) and *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner (2005) sold over four million copies each while explaining the secrets of how the business world works. Buying business books and reading them from cover to cover was a cultural pastime throughout corporate America.

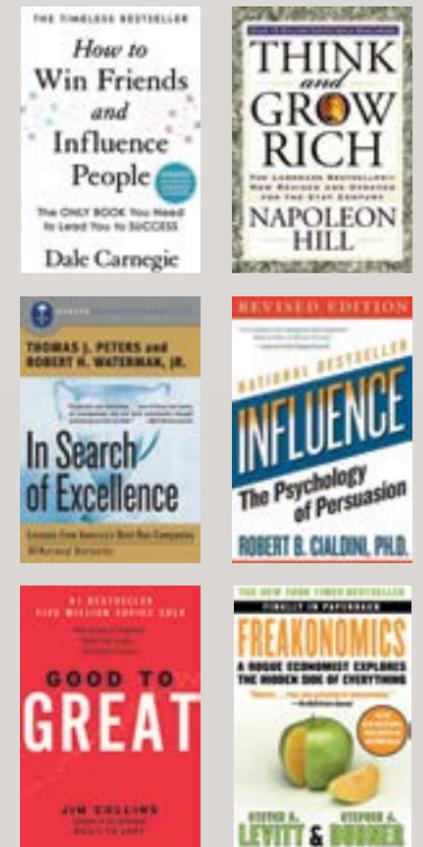
That silent reading dependably sparked fireworks. "It led to these big discussions," says career-training-firm owner Jordana Magonigal, who read roughly 20 books with her colleagues during her previous tenure as an executive at a business-media company. In a break from the gratingly faux-polite conversations at many workplaces, her peers felt comfortable throwing down the

gauntlet and debating an author's opinion. "Even if people didn't agree," she says, "they knew where the concept was coming from." Titles included *Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant* by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne (2005), *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* by Malcom Gladwell (2000), *Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us* by Seth Godin (2008), and *Death by Meeting: A Leadership Fable... About Solving the Most Painful Problem in Business* by Patrick Lencioni (2004), which the executive team read when shifting to five-minute touchpoints instead of meetings. "In exchange for reading a really short book, it reduced a lot of pushback," she says. "No one felt like the CEO was pulling the rug out from under them."

**B**ooks have always been the ultimate tool for deep thinkers, and executives increasingly see them as a way to effectively get into workers' heads. An engaging book can deeply shape personal thinking. "Readers hear it in their own voice and can integrate it in a way that gets to the core of who they are," says Chi Hitchens, an executive consultant who assembles booklists

## Business-Book Hall of Fame

Some big sellers executives have turned to over the decades.



**“Don’t have a CEO just pull something off the shelf.”**

for both leaders and organizations. “It’s not enough to do workshops and give examples.” This might be why smartphones and laptops have not sounded the expected death knell for training via books. Despite the publishing industry’s struggles—revenue growth did not keep up with inflation over the first two decades of this century—leaders in the know realize that books offer what trainings cannot: a common lexicon, a shared vision, and talking points.

This breath of (very old) fresh air comes to a corporate world that’s shifting to online and instructor-led training: Almost 80 percent of organizations now use virtual classrooms, webcasting, or video broadcasting for training, according to Research.com. In the US alone, firms poured \$98 billion into training programs last year.

But survey after survey has found that even the most creative online program rarely captures worker attention. In the Research.com study, more than 60 percent of workers said they felt only “somewhat satisfied” or “less satisfied” with their training opportunities. Remarkably, more and more employees are leaning on their own learning strategies to build up their AI skills. All of which opened the door for firms to turn old-school.

For her part, Hitchens ensures that books actually get read (or listened to) with a two-step process. First, she personally provides people with a copy. This overcomes a key barrier. Then she encourages them to schedule time with their book as they would a meeting. “People



## The Books That Build Empires

Top leaders have long endorsed their favorite books, including Warren Buffett, whose annual letters to investors regularly included reading recommendations, and Bill Gates, whose website includes over 200 book reviews, under the banner “I always love talking about books I’ve read.”

### BILL GATES

*Business*

*Adventures:*

*Twelve Classic Tales from the World of Wall Street*

by John Brooks (1969)

*Mindset: The New*

*Psychology of Success*

by Carol Dweck (2006)

*The Ride of a Lifetime: Lessons Learned from 15 Years as CEO of the Walt Disney Company*

by Robert Iger (2019)



### GARY BURNISON

We’d be remiss to not include our CEO’s latest book, *Love, Hope & Leadership: A Special Edition*, a collection of perspectives on modern leadership. Flip through its to-the-point directives, which remind managers, executives, and entrepreneurs that the best leaders are empathetic and authentic, and help others thrive.

Alamy

### WARREN BUFFETT

*The Outsiders: Eight Unconventional CEOs and Their Radically Rational Blueprint for Success*

by William N. Thorndike Jr. (2012)

*The Intelligent Investor: The Definitive Book on Value Investing*

by Benjamin Graham (1949)

*Investing Between the Lines: How to Make Smarter Decisions by Decoding CEO Communications*

by L.J. Rittenhouse (2012)

### SHERYL SANDBERG

*Now, Discover Your Strengths*

by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton (2001)

*The Lean Startup: How Today’s Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses*

by Eric Ries (2011)

*Conscious Business: How to Build Value Through Values*

by Fred Kofman (2005)

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send me confirmation that they’ve actually scheduled reading sessions,” says Hitchens. “Ninety-seven percent of the time they do it, especially if I have buy-in that it’s going to help them be more effective leaders.”

Executives wondering where to start would do well to imitate the stalwart of organizational reading, the military, which requires reading lists on topics like leadership, wars, global dynamics, and history. “It’s been a longtime practice,” says JP Sniffen, practice leader in Korn Ferry’s Mili-

tary Center of Expertise. Book titles are assigned carefully, based on rank rather than role.

At large companies, a diverse team can read potential titles ahead of time and publicize their picks to avoid the dynamic of readers taking offense at some aspect of the material or author. “Don’t have a CEO just pull something off the shelf,” says engagement expert Mark Royal, senior client partner at Korn Ferry. Many leaders also forget that employees have drastically different capacities for absorbing and retaining what they read, says Nicole Landi, a professor of developmental psychology at the University of Connecticut. “There are vast differences in reading comprehension,” she says. For her, the answer is to improve retention by

bringing up points from the books during the course of work projects. “You want to provide frequent opportunities for people to retrieve and recall the information that you most want them to learn,” says Landi.

As for those worried that people simply don’t read much anymore, that may be true for many workers addicted to their iPhone. But people with advanced degrees still read for personal interest nearly twice as long as the average reader, at 28 minutes per day, according to data from the Academy of Arts and Sciences. Book sales, meanwhile, got a nice boost during the pandemic and that has held steady, with sales up 6.5 percent from 2023 to 2024, according to *Publishers Weekly*.

In the end, one of the best strategies

may be to include non-business titles in leadership reading lists, says Tiffany Joy Murchison, CEO of TJM & Co. Media Boutique, who assigns reading during media workshops. A fan of audiobooks, she points out that “listening to great narrators improves diction and intonation, and helps clients become better speakers.” She is specific in her assignments—“Read three chapters, and we’ll talk about them at our meeting in two weeks”—but still gets pushback, particularly from high-ranking executives. She can always lean on peer pressure: If employees are reading and chatting about a book, nearly everyone else will join in too. Those group dynamics alone can open a new chapter in training success. ▀