

Using Books For More Than Just Compost

By Bruce Hodes

Books, like compost, get good things to grow in organizations. Over the years of coaching companies, it has become clear to this consultant that books have the power to change. Reading specific, specially selected books can create an environment conducive to causing and creating organizational change and development. When a management group reads the same book, it is like they've had a common experience with a common language to communicate with each other more effectively. So, what does that get you?

Reading the same book gets executives of the company on the same page. After everyone has been reading the same title, the readers share a common vocabulary. Groups reading together enhance understanding and the acceptance of new ideas. Even when the leadership team does not agree on the ideas of the book, the executives now have parameters from which to debate and explore issues.

For example, I have seen business teams put together terrific customer service programs after reading Raving Fans by Ken Blanchard. Heck, after reading that book I've seen teams discover for the first time that having "raving fans" as customers could be a very good thing. Before reading that book, they didn't have the distinction of "raving fans," nor interest in having raving fan customer service.

Case in point: One company, after reading Raving Fans, put into practice using a survey that asked their customers: "Are you satisfied with our service? Yes or no? And why?" Another question was, "Are you one of our raving fans? Yes or no? And why?" This type of survey gave employees lots of feedback. It also focused them on converting their customers into "raving fans."

Here is another example of the power of a book. About two years ago, I was working with a company that runs homes for and offers services for the disabled. They are a for-profit company and fairly large at \$100M. They have an employee stock-ownership plan (ESOP) that provides a way for employees to own stock in their company. This company marketed itself as "employee owned" both in its marketing material and how they answered the phone.

What disturbed the leadership of this company is that few employees could relate to being an owner, nor could they see how being an employee-owned company benefited them. As I explored this situation with the leadership group, it became abundantly clear that no one saw any benefit to the ESOP. Whenever the CFO went into the nuances and benefits of the ESOP, everyone promptly went to sleep, or rolled their eyes.

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After assessing the situation, and mulling things through in my genius brain, I invited this leadership group to read the book *Open-Book Management* by John Case. To be honest, I did not invite them; I made them read it. This book is about the various ways companies used to have everyone embrace being effective business people and being responsible for the financial future of the company.

After reading the book, members of the leadership got excited because they saw a pathway to engaging employees. These executives saw how they could make the ESOP relevant. They saw the light and were eager to move toward it with velocity and enthusiasm.

Open-Book Management in this company has now become a movement and a cause célèbre. The CFO began to do research on what the value of the ESOP could be to the leadership group. A division of the company began to organize games with incentives with their frontline group. They are off and running in exploring how the ESOP can be a powerful organizing focus for the company. All this came from reading a book that costs \$20.00 or so. Not a bad return for that investment.

Books with large print, and preferably with pictures, are the most appealing to business people. Stories and parables are appreciated. A synopsis at the end of the chapter, with Cliffs-type notes, is also appreciated. If the book is good, and at the same time scholarly, you can make the case to read it. At times, this can be a tough sell. The ultimate test for the consuming executive is whether or not the material presented is applicable and useful. The more user-friendly the material is, the better.

Books as manure allow businesses to do without blood-sucking consultants. [Note - the author himself is a consultant.] In and of themselves, I have seen books transform companies and their business cultures. The leadership group reads the book, talks about it and applies it. It is simple, inexpensive and effective, and who needs the blood-sucker anyway?

Books are also a great way for new employees to get indoctrinated into the company. Over the years, I have seen new employees given a stack of books to read and digest in the first 30-40 days. This was part of their orientation. New employees at one company had to take a test on the book, and in another, they had to sit and talk with the CEO about the book.

So what's the message here? Get your organizations to read and then engage in dialogue about the books they read. Even if they whine, groan, complain, kvetch, and drool, have them read to discover new skills; to be mentally stimulated and challenged by the new ideas they find there. They will be better for it.

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