



One of my favorite podcasts is the [Read to Lead Podcast](#) hosted by [Jeff Brown](#). In each episode he interviews an author about their book and discusses insights on leadership, personal development, productivity, and more. I recently caught up with Jeff to discuss the importance of reading for personal growth, book recommendations, and how to incorporate reading into our weekly battle rhythms.

Joe: You went from not reading at all to reading becoming the focal point of your professional career. That's a drastic leap. Can you discuss your transformation?

Jeff: From the time I graduated college until I was in my early 30's, I didn't do any reading at all. That was in large part because when I was done with school I didn't think I had to learn anymore. One day, a supervisor introduced some business books – books from Seth Godin, Jim Collins, Pat Lencioni and suddenly I saw the light. It helped that the person who recommended the books was someone I had a lot of respect for and I was ready to learn. So as I read [Purple Cow](#) by Seth Godin and [Good to Great](#) by Jim Collins [and Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#) by Pat Lencioni, I was mesmerized by what was available and what I had been missing out on.

I learned that if I wanted to grow in my career and as a human being, that I had to be a life-long learner. Learning never stops. I would finish a book and then start another one. I was looking for more recommendations, much like you provide on your site, and taking advantage of services like [Audible](#) on my commute. And it snowballed from there.

Joe: How do you think reading improved your leadership abilities, or for that matter, improves anyone's leadership abilities?

Jeff: To be an effective leader you have to be open to new ideas. If you go around living in your bubble doing things the way you've always done them, then the results you get won't change much. Nothing you do will be new or fresh and you will go stale. You limit your growth and your potential.

You have to be a life-long learner. And I don't know of a better or cheaper way to become a life-long learner than through reading. Books on leadership, personal growth, entrepreneurship, and sales and marketing help make me a more well rounded person and a smarter person.

When I'm reading books from these different "spokes on a wheel," and come across a problem, I find that I my brain makes connections across books. For example, I might piece

together an answer to a problem by taking something from a marketing book and combining it with something else from a personal growth book. Reading helps me take two ideas, which on the surface don't seem related, and combine them to solve tough problems.

These unique solutions are only going to happen if you are constantly exposing yourself to the thinking of others and people who have shared their experiences through writing.

Joe: What approach do you take to reading? Do you highlight, take margin notes, or keep a notebook to capture your thoughts?

Jeff: Yes to all. I prefer physical books so that I can write in them. There is something in the act of writing things down by hand that helps me retain what I'm reading. I highlight, write in the margins, and use sticky notes to mark pages. What works best for me is my dedicated notebook that has nothing in it but notes from books. I will color tab it so that I can reference it by book. And when I fill one of those up, I move on to the next one.

I've also used the blank pages in the front and the back of the book to index things I want to remember from that book so that when I pull that title off the shelf, I can open it up and immediately see what I wanted to remember when I read it the last time.

Joe: You have mentioned several times on your podcast that it was your boss who first exposed you to the importance of reading. How would you recommend leaders introduce professional reading into the workplace?

Jeff: I think the way in which my general manager approached it was great. He would recommend a book and sometimes even provide us with a copy. Then he sent out invitations for weekly short-guided discussions on the selected chapters. Those discussions with my coworkers and general manager helped me take what I was reading and apply it to the position I was in at the time.

The key to reading to lead isn't reading just to read a bunch of books - what good does it do if we don't apply any of it? I actually have to do something with that knowledge to make a difference, so those weekly book discussions helped me do that.

Today, I've taken that concept and created [Read to Lead University](#) where once a month, I walk through a book with listeners. Each person that signs up receives a summary of the book and sometimes the authors join us for the discussion. It's how I've continued that practice that someone introduced to me so many years ago.

Joe: There is a tension in the military between being action-oriented and sitting back and reading. Many argue that the daily leadership experiences they encounter are enough and that they don't need to read. What would you say to people who don't think there is value in reading?

I've been there. I once felt like I didn't need to read because I was getting leadership training through my on the job experiences. But I now subscribe to the Jim Rohn quote, "You are the average of the 5 people you spend the most time with." If you limit yourself to only learning from the people you work with, then you're limiting your growth and potential. Some of our brightest minds have taken the time to write books and sell them for around \$20. If I can take one of these books and get a single great idea —then I consider it \$20 well spent. By reading these books, I expand my sphere to now include people who are at the forefront of the areas of expertise. Reading lets us aspire to be people who we might never get the chance to meet. Reading lets us go beyond the 5 people we spend the most time with, and become someone who can make an impact in their organizations or fields.

Joe: Is there value in reading fiction?

Jeff: Yes. I find fiction helps me become more creative. I don't read a lot of it, but I don't think it's any less valuable. Fiction or science fiction adds another element that we can pull from to connect unrelated ideas and develop solutions to problems we face.

Joe: What are some of the leadership/personal growth books you have most benefited from that you would recommend to military leaders?

Jeff: I would recommend three books. First, Simon Sinek's [*Leaders Eat Last*](#). It's great book for those looking to inspire teams. [I interviewed him about this book awhile back](#). Second, [*Die Empty: Unleash Your Best Work Today*](#) by Todd Henry. It's one of those books I've marked up more than any other. And finally, [*Multipliers: Why the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*](#) by Liz Wiseman. She contrasts multipliers against diminishers - or leaders who surround themselves with smarter people vice leaders who bring down others to make themselves better.

I encourage all leaders to check out [The Read to Lead Podcast](#) and also sign up for his email list. I've learned about so many great books from both his podcast and his emails.

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