



By Joe Byerly

Lately, I've had several conversations with incoming battalion commanders about creating reading programs for their units. They've all agreed that having one is important, but their philosophies differ greatly on the scope, the execution, and even the types of books they plan to use.

Almost every unit I've served in had some type of reading program. However, almost all of them had problems. In one, the commander assigned reading, but kept moving the planned discussion on the calendar to the point that it never occurred. Eventually he changed

command and we never understood why he selected the book or what he wanted us to take away from it. Another commander assigned some extremely dense reading to junior officers, and it fell flat. The book covered the operational level of war, and they didn't have the experiences or contextual understanding to appreciate it. They hated the book and some of them came to hate professional reading because of that experience.

So what does a good reading program look like?

Before I answer my own question, I want to provide you with some background on me. First, I didn't begin my military career as a writer and avid reader. Most of my weekends as a junior officer were spent partying, going out with friends, and playing Xbox. I grew to appreciate the importance of professional reading by leaders modeling that behavior ([not forcing me to read books](#)) and by learning how commanders throughout history turned that practice into a competitive advantage.

Additionally, my interest in professional reading increased as my investment in the profession of arms increased. I think this final point is lost on a lot of leaders -junior officers are still kicking the tires of profession.

Now, to return to the question, what does a good reading program look like? I think there are three characteristics that should be present. First, the book should be part of a holistic leader development program within a unit. Next, members of the organization need to understand why the commander selected specific books in the first place. Finally, there must be follow-through, meaning that there should be a discussion, an event, a presentation, a paper -some mechanism that allows ideas about the book to be shared across members of the organization.

Let me break each of these down a little bit further.

A book is more than a book

I think one of the worst things a leader can do is make reading mandatory but not connect the activity with a greater purpose. LTG James Rainey, the Commander of the Combined Arms Center says that books should be a subset of a holistic leader development program. And I couldn't agree more.

When commanders assign books because "they liked the book" or because "this is what he/she read when they were a lieutenant," junior officers will view reading as an impractical way to become a better leader. It helps when there is a visible connection between reading and improved performance.

When reading is a subset of a holistic leader development program, it reinforces other leader development activities in the organization, and junior leaders begin to see its value. For instance, when commanders want their leaders to improve their communication abilities, they typically have them give briefings, deliver operations orders, or write info papers. They could also assign [*Brief: Make a Bigger Impact by Saying Less*](#) by Joseph McCormack. *Brief* provides numerous insights and advice on effective written and verbal communication. In this example, reading supports a leader development objective AND junior officers see the immediate value of the book because it improves their abilities at work.

Obviously, not all professional reading will offer immediate benefits; some lessons gleaned from books may not prove beneficial until later in someone's military career. It's my opinion that for junior officers in particular, it's important to introduce them to books and articles that have immediate utility to them. In many cases, commanders are jump-starting a habit, not reinforcing one that is already present.

Reading can also serve as a way to introduce them to the professional aspects of military service and the online tools available to them. By selecting articles from [professional](#)

[journals](#), [military blogs](#), and military-affiliated websites such as the [Center For Army Lessons Learned](#), junior leaders gain an understanding of what's out there (which may become of greater importance in future assignments). It's like giving them a tour of the entire resort property so they know where to find the gym and the swim-up tiki bar. Making reading a subset of a leader development program is only one step, next you have to let them know why that book or article (or even podcast) is important to you.

The “why” matters

Once you've connected your reading list to your leader development program, it's important to explain why you selected a specific book. It provides your subordinate leaders a lens to read the material through. Books meet us where we are at experientially. We each approach a book with our own levels of education, understanding, and sets of experiences, so they may completely miss seeing the lesson you hoped for them to walk away with if it's not explicitly stated.

I have worked for/with a few senior leaders who were great tacticians and strategic thinkers but they were also avid readers. Whenever they recommended books, they told me how the book influenced them and also told me why they thought I should read it. I found this helped me get through some of the slower parts of the book.

Reading isn't a fire and forget activity

Next to assigning reading, it's as equally important to make the time to discuss the book or article either in person or, at a minimum, have them share lessons learned via a messaging app or social media group. Foremost, it shows that you value the exercise, because you ensured there was time on the calendar to talk about it.

Discussing assigned reading is like squeezing a sponge that has a little bit of water left in it, you are maximizing the learning opportunity. We all approach books with a different set of life experiences, so we each gain a little something different from the text. These differences

are great to share across a group of people. Discussion allows for the sharing of varying viewpoints and provides another venue to reinforce the goals of your leader development program. It also helps with retention of the material because they are reengaging with it.

Since, this is a post about reading, I can't help but provide a couple of suggested titles. I've thought a lot about what books I would select if I was developing a reading program at the battalion level. I've narrowed it down to six that I would choose from.

[*Legacy*](#) by James Kerr. Kerr explores the culture of New Zealand's All Blacks rugby team and how they've developed a strong positive culture within their organization. This book is short (224 pgs), easy to read, and the lessons are applicable to any level of military leadership. Discussions could focus on the practical steps everyone can take to foster a strong culture. Kerr also incorporates ideas and quotes from a lot of different authors, so in some respects this book is a gateway to further reading.

[*Ego is the Enemy*](#) by Ryan Holiday. I would argue that ego is the one demon that we tend to enlarge as we climb the ladder of rank and position in the military. In this book, Holiday provides numerous historic examples of how ego ruined people and the steps we can take to keep ours in check. I think the dangers of letting ego lead us astray are worth discussing early in a leader's military career.

[*Past is Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession*](#) by Murray and Sinnreich. This book is an edited volume of fourteen essays on the benefits and challenges of learning history as a military officer. Of note, Paul Van Riper's essay (he was the old retired guy that ran circles around the Joint Staff in Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink*), *The Relevance of History to the Military Profession: A Marine's View*, lists out the books he read throughout his storied military career (private to lieutenant general) and how they influenced him at each level. He even describes how the books took on new meaning when he reread them later in his career. I would use a few of the essays from this book as an

introduction to the importance of military history for our profession, not a 400-page, detailed book of a particular war.

[*Atomic Habits*](#) by James Clear. Leaders should learn how to develop good habits and minimize the unhelpful ones. This is probably the best book I've read on the subject. His lessons are applicable to individuals and organizations. I would tie this book to a line of effort focused on building strong leaders who know how to create strong habits within their organizations.

[*The Centurions*](#) by Jean Larteguy / [*Gates of Fire*](#) by Steven Pressfield. I would select one of these books because they are great examples of fiction that offer valuable lessons on leadership, culture, and character. They also promote different ways of thinking about military service. [A senior leader once told me that *The Centurions* served as a springboard](#) for him to learn more about the French experience in counter insurgency, thus greatly influencing his outlook in his approach in Iraq and Afghanistan.

[*Brief: Make a Bigger Impact by Saying Less*](#) by Joseph McCormack. To me, this book is a quick win on promoting professional reading. It's short, the lessons are practical, and leaders can incorporate them immediately and see benefits. Imagine a training meeting or command and staff where everyone got to the point quickly?

I hope you found this post helpful, and at a minimum, it made you think about what type of reading program you want to promote in your organization. If you are looking for book recommendations, check out [The Monthly Reading List Email](#), where I provide a list of 3-5 books at the end of every month that I think are worth reading. Also, check out [The Sunday Email](#), it's a short newsletter with a passage from a book and a few thoughts to get you going for the week. We'll be sharing books that the FTGN has read and feature guest posts from senior military leaders and popular authors.

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