

Once Upon an HRD Book Club

Here's how to create your own community of lifelong learners.

This article shares our experience as members of an HRD book group, with some practical startup tips, descriptions of different types of book groups, and lessons learned about such groups. Mainly, membership in an HRD book group is an opportunity for self-directed learning in a social context, and it fosters a mindset for lifelong learning.

By Dede Bonner and Liz Tarnner

Just when you don't think you can handle another piece of information, and your brain is screaming *overload*, you get a call from a friend inviting you to join a professional book group. That means adding two more things to your already groaning schedule: reading a book and going to a meeting to discuss it. Why bother? You're already feeling torn between too much to do in your job and at home. That's what we thought, too, until two years ago when a chance meeting launched our professional book group.

We discovered that an HRD book group is a great way to discuss ideas about the field, make connections, enjoy books we might not have read, build bridges between our personal and work lives, and start a community of lifelong learners. People are still reading more than email these days. The founder of the Association of Book Group Readers and Leaders, Rachel Jacobsohn, estimated in 1994 that there were as many as 250,000 book groups in the United States, conservatively. Since that time there has been an explosion of interest and participation in book groups, due to media attention, increased use of the Internet to connect with others, Oprah Winfrey's televised book club, and popular radio shows. Jacobsohn classifies book groups into these types:

- online book groups that are typically offshoots of electronic chat rooms
- library, association, or bookstore groups, usually free and public, organized by a sponsor
- living room groups that require a personal commitment by a small group and meet informally.

Similar but different

Our book club is similar to living room book groups in that the meetings are informal and leaderless, and require a fixed roster of people committed to continuing. We rotate small monthly meetings in our homes. In comparison, book groups offered by local bookstores, employers, and professional associations typically meet at a public site and anyone can attend.

We differ from a publicly sponsored group and living room groups because our members have closely aligned job interests and similar education, and we

focus primarily on professional development. Instead of reading popular fiction, we read HRD literature. Unlike the online groups or Oprah Winfrey's TV book club with millions of members, we purposely choose to be a small group with a shared interest in expanding our knowledge of the HRD and training field. It's this stability in membership and attendance that is building our sense of being a community of lifelong learners. Our professional expertise is growing collectively as a group.

For example, we often link insights from earlier readings to the current book discussion. Our reading is a point of convergence between our professional and personal lives, among like-minded colleagues.

Part of that sense of a learning community stems from our emphasis on the personal touch—compared with online, professional association, or bookstore

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groups. Our charter states that all members must r.s.v.p. regarding meetings or "we'll worry about you."

How to start your group

Starting an HRD book group can take considerable time and commitment. And it may take a while for your group to become firmly established. Success in launching your book group has to be a priority, despite all of the competing items on your to-do list. Working with a co-founder can help minimize the risk of failure, alleviate the time-consuming tasks of initial organizing, and create a wide pool of potential members. It perhaps sounds contradictory, but a certain amount of structure is needed for an in-

formal learning atmosphere.

Here are the key considerations for starting an HR book group:

- initiating and maintaining consistent logistics
 - choosing books that are considered interesting and worthwhile by members
 - choosing members who are compatible, interested, and enthusiastic.
- Logistics.** According to Jacobsohn, most book groups meet every four to six weeks. You may decide to meet more or less frequently. In our case, we have evening meetings the second Wednesday of the month. That works well for us. We've found that book groups that meet too often suffer from frustration and lack of preparation.

Schedule meetings well in advance, and seek volunteer facilitators six to 12 months ahead. When members can plan for meetings, it increases their attendance and long-term commitment.

The facilitator or host emails other members three to four weeks prior to each meeting about such items as the book selection, directions to the meeting home, and an r.s.v.p. request. Some include discussion questions or information about where to purchase the book. The facilitator chooses the book, leads the discussion, and provides refreshments! The typical agenda consists of a short social time, followed by dinner and the book discussion.

The role of the facilitator rotates monthly. Our system allows the opportunity to build facilitation skills. Some members who weren't confident in leading a discussion have been supported by a co-facilitator. Other book groups have one primary facilitator, and some groups pay a professional facilitator to lead their discussions.

We have a central coordinator who maintains the membership information and meeting schedule. Her two primary duties are organizing and maintaining the contact list of members and ensuring the long-term scheduling of upcoming meetings, readings, and volunteer facilitators. She often calls or emails missing members before and after meetings to keep them involved and to reengage their commitment.

Books. The choice of books is central to stimulating active participation and ensuring that involvement will result in professional growth. We've read current

and classic HRD books, interspersed with such lighter fare as biographies. Some other criteria include broad themes or formats, essays, and HRD theory.

Our group holds several brainstorming discussions per year to choose a list of books, from which the rotating facilitators make the final selection. The criteria range from old favorites for fresh insight to complex books to praise reviews to recommendations by colleagues. On one occasion, we invited an author to join our discussion of his book. Discussion. The facilitator prepares questions to provide a framework and focus for the discussion. The questions are circulated before a meeting or distributed at the beginning so that everyone has a chance to reflect before the discussion.

The questions can be general or specific, reactive or inductive to new learning, application-oriented or evaluative.

Here are some suggestions:

- ❑ What are the book's pluses?
- ❑ What do you wish had been included?
- ❑ What three things did you learn?
- ❑ What was the most useful concept?
- ❑ Will it make a difference in how you approach your work?
- ❑ In what type of organizations could the book's principles be applied? Are they hard to implement?
- ❑ What message was the most meaningful? Quotable quotes?
- ❑ How does this book compare with others we've read?
- ❑ What was your overall reaction?

And here are some discussion topics we've used:

- ❑ Stacey (*Managing the Unknowable*) believes that innovation is an unpredictable, emergent event. Drucker (*Organization of the Future*) defines innovation as "change that creates a dimension of performance." What are the implications for more performance improvement and training in creativity and innovation?
- ❑ How does the perspective of Collins and Porras (*Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*) compare with that of DeGeus (*The Living Company*)?
- ❑ Do you think Bridges (*JobShift*) is right in his theory that jobs as we know them are going to go away? How will job shift affect people in our field?

How to Create Book Group #250,001

Startup Questions

Logistics

- ❑ How often will you meet? Where?
- ❑ How will you structure the roles and responsibilities of the central coordinator and facilitators?
- ❑ How will members communicate (email, phone, and so forth)?
- ❑ What will be the typical meeting agenda?

Books

- ❑ What types of books will you read?
- ❑ Who will choose the books? What will the criteria be?

Membership

- ❑ What will be your criteria for membership?
- ❑ What will be the starting size of the group?

What Has Worked for Us

Logistics

- ❑ Monthly meetings are consistently scheduled in members' homes.
- ❑ Central coordinator maintains membership and meeting details. The facilitator role rotates monthly to the current volunteer host, who chooses the book, leads discussion, and provides refreshments.
- ❑ Members communicate through phone calls and emails, with emphasis on the latter.
- ❑ Social time is brief, followed by dinner and discussion. Entire meeting is two hours.

Books

- ❑ Current and classic HRD books, interspersed with lighter or shorter selections.
- ❑ Chosen by the rotating facilitator/host each month, based on experience and research. Members can veto, but rarely do.

Membership

- ❑ By invitation; makeup is friends and colleagues. Total: 25 members; six to 12 per meeting.

❑ *Flight of the Buffalo* was published in 1993. To be labeled a classic, a book must transcend time, be cited by many people, and present ideas that have far-reaching impact. Do you think this book qualifies?

Membership. Start by inviting six to eight colleagues to a planning meeting at your house. Ask each of these core members to recruit several others.

Our membership is a mix of HR managers, trainers, consultants, and writers. Most work for different organizations, including technical firms, federal government agencies, nonprofit associations, and independent consultants. All members have a lot of experience in HR, but not everyone is actually in the field. The members represent a variety of work settings, including public and private organizations, nonprofit groups, professional associa-

tions, academes, and independent consultancies—giving a well-rounded mix of work experience and situations for issues raised in the books.

Membership is by invitation, based on experience and familiarity with business and management issues. Some candidates attend a meeting on a trial basis and then decide whether they want to join. We've found that the best way to grow and maintain membership is to invite people personally. Over time, we've become the friends of friends, thus expanding our network of professional partners and personal allies. We have approximately 25 active members, though we've never had them all at one meeting. Because most meetings are held in our homes, few of us can accommodate such a large crowd. And our experience confirms the suggestions made by Jacobsohn and others that the best size for discussion is six to 12 participants.

Commitment to the book group waxes and wanes, depending on people's work demands and personal lives. Meeting at each other's homes is key to building connections and bridging our personal and professional lives. The intimacy offsets the formal, limited aspects of professional workplace relationships, which is how many members first got to know each other.

Alternative meeting places include a member's work site or even a church, as is the case with one of our members. Because our group is fairly well glued, there's no danger of diminishing the personal aspect with an occasional meeting not in someone's home.

Chapter and verse

Here are some guidelines for making your HRD book club a success.

Write a charter. We wrote a charter at the first meeting to clarify our goals and expectations. It includes the group's objectives, a description of membership criteria, a schedule for meetings, logistical considerations, ground rules, and a statement of flexibility. It also includes statements such as, "Book sharing among members is encouraged to keep the costs down and interaction up."

Over time, the charter has also been useful to inform prospective members about our group, and we recently had a planning meeting to reconsider the charter now that the group has matured. From that discussion, we formalized more ground rules, such as ensuring there would be sufficient notice to members on upcoming book choices so they could purchase them in advance.

Keep members involved and informed. It's important to get and keep people involved, even if they aren't attending meetings regularly. That means making them feel special with frequent follow-up calls and emails so they know we missed them at the last meeting. Have patience with invisible members

The HRD Book Group Selections, 1997 – 1998

- ❑ *Learning as a Way of Being* (Vaill)
- ❑ *Synchronicity* (Jaworski)
- ❑ *The Flight of the Buffalo* (Belasco and Stayer)
- ❑ *A Simpler Way* (Wheatley)
- ❑ *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge)
- ❑ *JobShift* (Bridges)
- ❑ *Intellectual Capital* (Stewart)
- ❑ *Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman)
- ❑ *Managing the Unknowable* (Stacey)
- ❑ *The Living Company* (DeGeus)
- ❑ *Leader of the Future* (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, and Beckhard)
- ❑ *Coaching for Performance* (Whitmore)
- ❑ *Built to Last* (Collins and Porras)
- ❑ *Web of Inclusion* (Helgesen)
- ❑ *Beyond the Wall of Resistance* (Maurer)
- ❑ *Rewiring the Corporate Brain* (Zohar)
- ❑ *Personal History* (Graham)
- ❑ *The Organization of the Future* (Hesselbein)
- ❑ *The Circle of Innovation* (Peters)
- ❑ *Composing a Life* (Bateson)
- ❑ *Blur: The Speed of Change in a Connected Economy* (Davis and Mercer)

who attend infrequently, because they may surprise you by returning after a hectic period in their lives.

A central coordinator bonds the group. But, at the same time, it's important to have decentralized responsibility for long-term existence. Meeting in our homes has been instrumental in bonding our group.

Understand the varying degree of commitment. The issues we encounter stem primarily from members' busy lives and changes such as a baby or new job. Many members have busy travel schedules, and just making the commute to a meeting isn't easy.

Most members' commitment fluctuates. Some don't read the books in time and are conflicted about letting the group down by not being prepared. They ask, "Is it all right to come even if I haven't finished the book?" Basically, our answer is yes, it's OK. But we did decide to place members who haven't attended within a

year on an inactive list, with the open invitation to rejoin.

Club member Carlene Reinhart, president of CLR Associates, says, "There has to be a core of committed people for a book club like this to be successful. People have to be willing to take responsibility to host meetings, read the books, and come to the meetings. And the meetings have to be worth the effort that folks make to come to them. It's a combination of bright people, commitment, individual interest, and the desire to learn."

Vary the selections. A few books have been too complex to digest in one session. In fact, we often feel overwhelmed by the reading assignments. So, we have been including lighter or shorter selections, such as Graham's and Bateson's books. We may read magazine articles in the future.

And we take a break during the holidays by having a party and no December selection.

Follow a schedule. As in most book groups, we often struggle with the need to balance time for socializing with focused discussion. Some members enjoy the personal conversations, while others are anxious to talk about the book. As we get to know each other better, the need for balance is greater. We recently circulated an agenda with guidelines.

Evaluate periodically. At the planning session, we reconsidered every factor and made decisions to help clarify expectations for membership and participation. Such issues are best resolved during initial and follow-up planning sessions that are separate from book discussions.

There are some issues to consider before starting your HRD book club (see the table for those and what has worked for us).

It's more than a book club. It goes deeper than the monthly discussion and has its own history. Our group was founded in January 1997, as a result of a chance meeting of two HR professionals at a conference. After realizing they lived in the same area, they agreed to work together to start a book group as a fun and intellectually stimulating way to extend their conference experiences. They wanted more structure in their self-directed reading and lifelong learning, and they needed better links to apply their professional growth to real workplace issues. As those co-founders signed on charter members, they were surprised how common their needs were among their colleagues, who enthusiastically agreed to find time in their busy lives to join them at monthly meetings. It seems they had struck a nerve.

Since then, this HRD book club has served as a tool in our search for meaning and deeper connections in our work and personal lives. Our members come from different organizations, with different priorities and many distractions. The opportunity to encounter and evaluate ideas in the field together has built a bond that will help us deal with the increasingly depersonalized and downsized workplace.

Most of us in the profession experience information overload, a high level of job-related stress, and fewer co-workers to share our thoughts and concerns with. But in the book group, we've created a shared legacy and synergy through our discussions, resulting in links for self-employed members and those who are the only HRD professionals in their organizations.

The book group fills a distinct void. Members agree that our lively discussions and growing friendships bring a sense of balance that was missing. For most members, the group is an antidote to workplace stress. It's also an opportunity to encounter and evaluate the huge body of professional literature with like-minded, well-informed people.

One member says, "This group keeps me motivated to read the new HR stuff and to know what the new stuff is." Another comments, "Now I'm reading books I wouldn't have necessarily chosen on my own. It's amazing to me how much better I understand these books now that

How to be a Better Participant

- ❑ Come prepared to share your opinions and reactions.
- ❑ Highlight key passages or pages in advance.
- ❑ Take the time to answer questions that are circulated prior to the meeting.
- ❑ Listen thoughtfully to others.
- ❑ Keep your comments brief and to the point.
- ❑ Stay focused on how you can use the ideas in your organization or work.
- ❑ Listen to the audio version of the book if you're especially busy.

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I'm sharing ideas with other people."

We are reading HRD books more critically, examining their applications to our personal, professional, and organizational lives. The book group benefits our work lives directly because we use this forum to bounce real workplace issues off of each other. Instead of worrying about what we might be missing in our professional libraries, we have found a structured way to stay current with the latest literature, while enjoying the social aspects of regular, relaxed meetings.

One member describes her experience with the group this way: "It's like an exciting class that doesn't end with the semester. It keeps going and gives us a chance to get to know each other better."

Membership in an HRD book group is also inexpensive entertainment. The only costs involved are setting aside

time, making a commitment, and purchasing or sharing books. The return-on-investment is pleasure and intellectual challenge. And perhaps most importantly for some members, it breaks the routine dominated by work (or overwork).

Our HRD book group has evolved into a self-directed learning community. We continually update our knowledge and stay on the cutting edge of HRD and business trends. We've found that this kind of book group satisfies the main types of self-directed learners: goal oriented, activity oriented, and learning oriented.

For goal-oriented learners, who are typically impatient with traditional classroom learning, the book group lets them choose books tied specifically to their goals. For activity-oriented learners, who are stimulated by experiential situations, they enjoy the lively discussions in a social setting. For learning-oriented learners, who value education as a constant activity, the group is a way to keep their minds agile.

As a community of those types of self-directed learners, we meet our professional goals, expand our social networks, and satisfy our need for lifelong learning. There's power in our interactive discovery and collaboration.

Member Wendy Mack, a consultant with Burgess Levin Corporation, says that the group helps her continue learning beyond her degree. "This group is just perfect timing for me. All of the input I get on each book inspires me to want to read more."

As a community of self-directed learners, we control our own learning experiences and find partners to share them with. A professional book group promotes acceptance of learning as an everyday occurrence and is an important foundation for a personal strategy of continuous learning.

Reinhart says, "The books are our catalyst, but the learning will come from the 'us' of us." That is the synergy of group learning and interaction.

In meeting our personal objectives, we add value to our organizations, clients, and employees. By keeping ourselves informed and connected, we bring greater knowledge and more tools to serve our customers. A book group can serve as a learning model and a way to extend learning from conferences and

other formal educational experiences. Book groups can turn us into proactive players instead of just reactors to the dramatically changing world.

Many members have shared the group's selections at work with their managers and colleagues or have incorporated ideas from the books in their work. We believe we're building a learning community or community of practice as described by Tom Peters.

We plan to include community outreach sessions, invite more authors to join our discussions, and look for new ways to expand and apply the knowledge, tools, and techniques we gather from our meetings. Over time, we may socialize more outside of the group and come up with additional (and we hope innovative) ways to share our interests and expertise.

Book groups come in all sizes and types, and each is unique based on the chemistry of its members, according to Ellen Slezak in *The Book Group Book*. Here's how one of our members, HR consultant Marylou Whalen, sums up our group: "The invitation to join the book club came at a very opportune time in my career. Belonging to the club has helped me gain the confidence that I can make a successful transition from being an HR professional in an organization to being an independent HR consultant. The members are role models and helpful supporters for each other, as each of us contemplates new career choices. It's an important and enjoyable networking opportunity."

And they lived happily ever after. □

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Want to Know More?

□ Association of Book Group Readers and Leaders, P.O. Box 885, Highland Park, IL 60035; 847.266.0431. Founded by Rachel Jacobsohn in 1994. Strives to connect individual readers with existing book groups. Publishes a newsletter, *Reverberations*, three times a year. Mostly fiction, but also general advice on book groups.

□ *Between the Lines*. Box 88, Fairview, NC 28730; 704.628.9750. Quarterly gazette that tells readers what's good and why. Mostly fiction, but some biographies and other nonfiction books; serves as a sample guide for discussion groups.

□ *The Reading Group Handbook: Everything You Need to Know From Choosing Members to Leading Discussions*, 2d edition, by Rachel W. Jacobsohn (Hyperion, 1998)

□ *What to Read: An Essential Guide for Reading Group Members and Other Book Lovers*, by Mickey Pearlman (HarperCollins, 1994)

□ *The Book Group Book: A Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group*, 2d edition; Ellen Slezak, editor (Chicago Review Press, 1996)