

Chapter 3

Talking About Books

...How commanders are using professional reading to “target the learning curve”

As the Stephanie Gray story and the *Hubbard Effect* demonstrate, online connections and face-to-face gatherings are powerful means of creating conversations that impact leader effectiveness. A growing number of leaders are also using professional reading as a catalyst for conversations within their units—shifting the emphasis from the reading to the conversation about the reading.¹

To support and encourage this type of professional reading, the CC team has created the *Pro-Reading Challenge*. We provide company commanders with copies of a book of their choosing and create a space online for them to discuss it. “When you and your leaders read together with an eye toward practical applications,” we tell company commanders, “the conversations that result will improve your unit’s performance.” The specific type of reading—whether a book, a chapter in a book, a journal article, or perhaps content from CompanyCommand.army.mil—is not what’s most important about the challenge. The emphasis of the challenge is on the conversations *about* the reading, which happen when the leader creates space for it—during a meal, around the HMMWV hood, or even online. The very first unit to take the challenge was HHC/1-509th (ABN), part of the JRTC OPFOR Battalion at Fort Polk, LA.

¹ Army leaders have long regarded professional reading as an important part of their personal development, and there is a time-honored tradition of encouraging one’s subordinate leaders to read. The typical model, however, focuses on the individual—reading is something you do on your own, and what you learn depends on what you alone get out of it.

They selected *Leadership, The Warrior's Art*, a great book coauthored and edited by Chris Kolenda. The participants—the specialty platoon leaders, primarily—read the book and captured what they were learning in an online forum set up for them within CC. This first experience was especially memorable: not only did Chris Kolenda personalize each book with a note and his signature, he also joined the online discussion.



Although very few “outsiders” (people who weren’t part of the HHC/1-509th) posted comments, it became apparent to us that the wider profession was listening in on the conversation—among them, leaders throughout the battalion (1-509th). Ron Clark, the battalion S3 at the time, told us that the battalion staff officers were discussing with each other the insights that the lieutenants involved were making online. The battalion commander commented to Ron that he was really impressed by the depth of the lieutenants’ understanding about leadership, especially that of one platoon leader who was typically very quiet.

Another example of the wider profession benefiting from this one reading program was revealed in an email sent to us by a company commander stationed hundreds of miles from Fort Polk:

CC.com has been a beacon of light for so many officers. I make it almost mandatory for my leaders. As a result, instead of "Good morning, sir!" I am approached by my lieutenants with, "Did you see the discussion on *The Warrior's Art* yesterday?" on more than one occasion.

—Chris Amos, 2101st TC (ALARNG)

In this way, one company’s reading program can become a learning event for leaders across the Army.

We emerged from this first reading-program experience thinking, “This will work!” The program, under the leadership of Steve Delvaux and then later Mike Runey, has taken on different forms, but has consistently served as a catalyst for professional reading, conversation, and learning about warfighting and leadership. In 2004 alone, more than 35 units took the *Pro-Reading Challenge*. Below, we share the experiences of two units,

illustrating the variety of strategies and the depth of impact possible with this program.

Todd Schmidt Takes the *Pro-Reading Challenge*

Unit: A/1-62 ADA, 25th Infantry Division (LIGHT), Schofield Barracks, Hawaii

Book Choice: *Taliban*, by Ahmed Rashid

Context: Preparing for Combat Operations in Afghanistan



“As we prepared for deployment to Afghanistan, my 1SG and I wanted to ensure that our leaders and Soldiers were grounded in basic knowledge about Afghanistan to include Islam, the culture, the history, and the language,” writes Todd from Afghanistan. “We partnered with CC’s *Pro-Reading Program*, and chose Ahmed Rashid’s book, *Taliban*. Mike Runey and team sent us free copies of the book and opened up a discussion forum for us in the professional reading section of the Web site. I sparked the online conversation with questions to focus my leaders in on some key aspects of the book, and we were off to the races.

“We also tied the online discussion to a series of OPDs we were doing as we prepared to deploy, which included simple face-to-face discussions as well as special events. For example, we invited a leading scholar on Islamic culture to speak to our leaders and to answer questions. He was born and raised in the Kandahar region and gave us an extremely credible sense of Afghanistan’s history and the key events we needed to know about.

“We also asked the president of the Muslim Association in Hawaii to speak to our Soldiers. He did a fantastic job of educating us about cultural issues including things to say/not to say, appropriate gestures, and appropriate interaction with women. Afterward, we had an authentic Afghani meal, complete with ethnic music and burning incense. Our intent was for the key leaders in the battery to hear, smell, taste, and touch a small part of where we were going. These experiences and the book we were reading were mutually reinforcing, each giving the other context and greater meaning.

“One interesting thing about the online discussion was that it caused people to think deeper about what they were learning. Instead of skimming the book or listening to the speaker and then forgetting about it, we were writing down what we were learning. And because we were reading each other’s comments, the team became aware of what others were learning. It’s cool when you write down what you got out of a chapter and then read what the other leaders got out of it. Given how busy we were, this combination of face-to-face experiences and conversation, coupled with the online reflection, turned out to be really valuable.

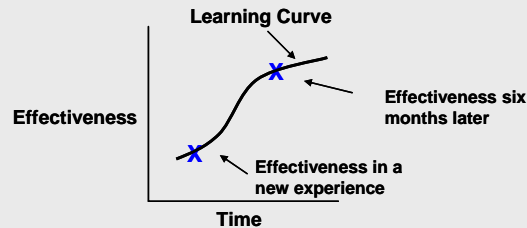
“Now that we are here on the ground in Afghanistan, I’m finding that the study we did of the people and culture is paying huge dividends. One insight that we gained from reading and discussing the book was that *aspects* of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan were positive. That topic of conversation laid the groundwork for us to more effectively understand a key part of our policy over here: helping disaffected Taliban rejoin a legitimate governing process. In the words of our allies over here, ‘Not all Taliban are terrorists, and not all terrorists are Taliban.’

“A second example is the Afghani tendency to switch alliances out of convenience. Our natural reaction is to judge that kind of behavior as unprincipled and disloyal. The discussions we had after reading *Taliban* allowed us to see the bigger picture when we got here to Afghanistan. When we did a two-week operation in the Zabol Province and the Arghandab Valley, for example, where no coalition forces had ever been, the people actually thought we were Russians! When they figured out who we were, they were extremely supportive. Two weeks later, after coalition forces departed the area, the enemy (ACM) came right back in and filled the void. Until there is enduring security and freedom in Afghanistan, it should not be surprising that the people appear to switch loyalties—they have been doing it for hundreds of years in order to survive.

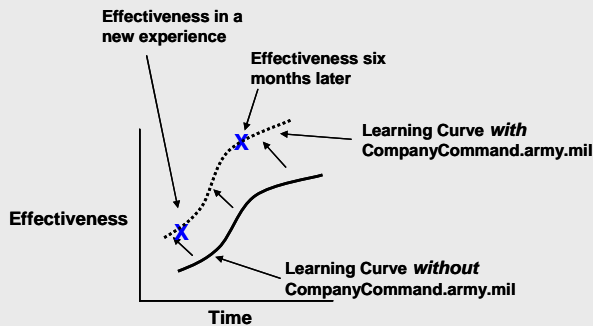
“In closing, I’d say that reading a book is not a silver bullet. It was valuable to us because it was integrated into supplemental OPDs that brought it to life, as well as face-to-face and online discussions. All that, together with our combat training, prepared us immensely for the mission we are currently conducting. As a result, we hit the ground running with much greater understanding and judgment about issues.”

Targeting the Learning Curve

The learning curve depicts the relationship between effectiveness and time in a particular experience (see diagram below). For example, it is to be expected that a company commander's effectiveness will increase the longer she is in command. This process of development is illustrated below as movement up and to the right along the learning curve.



Moving along the learning curve is certainly desirable, but leaders are primarily interested in shifting their learning curve up and to the left. In this way, company commanders will go into each experience they have at a higher level of effectiveness, potentially saving months of on-the-job learning. In addition to being more effective from the outset, leaders will be able to learn more from the experiences that they have.



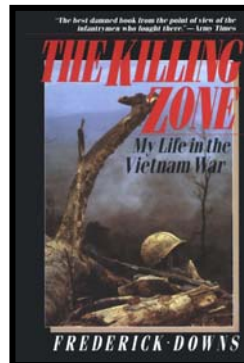
Todd Schmidt applied this thinking to his leader team as they prepared for combat operations in Afghanistan. Using the book *Taliban* along with an amazing professional development program, he was able to create a new learning curve for his leaders. As a result, they arrived in Afghanistan at a higher level of effectiveness. Moreover, Todd's leaders will likely continue to learn at a higher rate throughout the experience as a result.

Scott Shaw Takes the *Pro-Reading Challenge*

Unit: A/2-14 IN, 10th Mountain Division, Fort Drum, NY

Book Choice: *The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War*, by Frederick Downs

Context: Immediately prior to a deployment to Iraq



“I selected *The Killing Zone* for three reasons,” writes Scott Shaw from Iraq. “First, it is the story of an infantry platoon leader in Vietnam who faced many of the same dilemmas that junior officers are facing today. Second, I read it and was influenced by this book myself when I was a rifle platoon leader. And third, the platoon leader in the book was a member of our regiment; this gave us a link to the past.

“In our online space, I posted the following intent:

The Commander’s Intent

1. Examine how a fellow PL thinks through things in a combat zone. In specific, how a platoon leader controls his AO.
 2. Better understand the PL/PSG relationship. I think that this book shows a couple pretty good examples.
 3. Evaluate how platoons move within a company zone. We haven’t done it for a while.
 4. Assess a true LIC environment and how what the “big Army” sees as LIC, the squad leader and rifleman see as high-intensity conflict.
- Click to find out more about the book.*

“Since a book is too much to study at one time, I divided the book into four reading sessions based on the sections of the book. Mike Runey—the *Pro-Reading* coordinator—and I developed four questions to drive the online conversation, and posted them over the course of three weeks:

A/2-14 IN: Open Discussion

Discussion

The Bridges, Question 1 by Mike Runey
 First section - The Bridges. Question 1 - How do you handle a situation in which a Free Radical On the Battlefield (FROB) demands to move about your AO. In specific, how could LT Downs better ...

The Bridges, Question 2 by Mike Runey
 Question 2 - In this section of the book, it becomes apparent that Downs' platoon and the tankers on the bridge have started treating operations as routine. What are some ways to keep our ...

The Jungle, Question 1 by Scott Shaw
 In the Section 2, The Jungle, LT Downs platoon is split into two maneuver units to move onto the enemy. The squad led by the platoon sergeant follows a ridgeline and becomes engaged by the ...

The Jungle, Question 2 by Scott Shaw
 On 16 Nov 67, LT Downs platoon, while performing a movement to contact, discovers an NVA base camp and attacks it. Describe what you would have done differently if anything.

The A/2-14 IN
 Reading
 Discussion
 Questions

“My intent was for each lieutenant to respond online and then to use that as a springboard for our face-to-face discussion. I’ll use the discussion that went along with the last question—*The Jungle, Question 2*—as an example:

comment: **The Jungle, Question 2** (1 / 5) Posted: 04-29-2004

On 16 Nov 67, LT Downs platoon, while performing a movement to contact, discovers an NVA base camp and attacks it. Describe what you would have done differently if anything.

“The first lieutenant to respond states that he would not have done anything differently, although he does make note of a lack of rear security:

comment: **RE: The Jungle, Question 2** (2 / 5) Posted: 05-09-2004

I don't know if I would have done anything differently. It was a successful attack, they killed the enemy, gather some intel without losing any soldier. The only thing i didn't see was rear security. Every soldier had their weapon pointed toward the enemy, which means there were no rear security.

“The next lieutenant to respond confirms that Lieutenant Downs was tactically sound in his attack. I liked the fact that both of these lieutenants were thinking through current light infantry

tactics and comparing their understanding with what Lieutenant Downs did.

comment: **RE: The Jungle, Question 2**

(3 / 5) Posted: 05-09-2004

I can't say I would have done anything differently. From the description it seems that he was tactically sound in his attack of the location. It would help to have a visual picture of the attack, but he seemed to have an over watch element and an attack element. He also had his squads clearing bunkers and searching the structures. They then did a good job of searching the area and collecting the PIR. They then searched the area and establish a hasty defensive position. I can say I would have don't anything different.

“The third lieutenant, having read the previous responses, starts with ‘Yes—BUT...’ He identifies what he sees as a critical error: Lieutenant Downs initiated the attack with a voice command, which is a departure from the well-established infantry principle of initiating an attack with your most casualty producing weapon.

Answer: **RE: The Jungle, Question 2**

(4 / 5) Posted: 05-11-2004

Yes. BUT, I would never initiate a Platoon attack or an ambush of with a voice command. He should not have yelled "fire" even though that appears to be his preferred technique for initiating an attack.

Though LT Downs encountered a numerically superior force, his instinctive and decisive leadership carried his Platoon into a fight I would have entered as well under the same circumstances...but only the exact same. He flawlessly and fluidly executed Battle Drills 2 and 1 in rapid succession.

This is why I think that: His routes, approach, formations, actions at the security halt, "leader's recon" (kinda sorta by force), unit's use of effective hand and arm signals, simultaneous / fluid / completely effective emplacement of personnel as well as key weapons systems without being detected from a range of less than 10-100 meters, and unintended approach to the OBJ proved perfect in the movement to contact.

If I had accomplished the same, while maintaining the elements of surprise and initiative, I would have engaged the enemy forces.

However, I would have initiated the attack with my weapon system (and before the round had left my barrel I'd expect both guns to open). Of course, attempting to initiate with a claymore would be unrealistic considering this situation's particular METT-T. Remarks Complete.

“This kind of critical analysis is exactly what I was hoping for—it invites others to question, and it creates windows of opportunity for future conversation. The gem that would be the focus of our follow up face-to-face discussion came in the final comment:

comment: **RE: The Jungle, Question 2**

(5 / 5) Posted: 05-12-2004

i think that lt downs and his platoon did a good job on this mission. i can't see any major things that i would change. they set up a hasty attack and used the element surprise to help them gain superiority. they attacked and cleared and set up a defesive position to defend against a counterattack. the only other thing he could have done was call in artillery or air strike.

“As with the previous three questions, I met with my four lieutenants during a meal and informally talked about what we had learned from the chapter. I started this discussion off by asking, ‘Did anyone catch the last part of Lieutenant J’s comment: “The only other thing he could have done was call in artillery or an air

strike”? I’m wondering what you guys thought about that?’ That question launched us into a phenomenal conversation that included more questions. For example, ‘What if things hadn’t gone well for Lieutenant Downs on the objective?’ and ‘What other assets did he have available?’ Questions like this led us to insights about the value of integrating all available assets, including indirect fires, into platoon operations. In the conversation, we made connections and saw things that we had not seen in our individual readings of the book. It felt like a breakthrough of sorts—and I left that session knowing that if we went to combat, my lieutenants were better prepared than they were before.

“Part-way through this reading program experience, we were alerted to deploy to Iraq. As I write this, we are engaged in combat operations. I consider our reading program to be one factor in our success on the ground. For example, it helped give us a common reference point. It also helped my officers think deeper than just direct fire and maneuver of their forces. It taught them to use helicopters, recon assets, and anything else to avoid sending a man to do the job of a bullet. At the same time, it also taught them how one officer took his fight to the enemy, something that we have used several times. When we conduct split operations, when we have ‘free radicals on the battlefield,’ or when we sense complacency settling in—we have a depth of shared understanding as a direct result of *The Killing Zone* conversations.

“I also think that reading this particular book helped connect my lieutenants with former Soldiers, which showed how we are part of a time-honored profession that is bigger than just ourselves. As we are finding, some lessons in war are timeless.”

Unpacking the Stories

Leader teams seem to get the most out of professional reading when they combine reading a relevant book with face-to-face and written conversation. In the next chapter, we’ll go into greater depth about the transformative power of conversation. Here, we want to underscore the importance of choosing content that maps directly to your training goals.

Tips for Taking the *Pro-Reading Challenge*

- Select a relevant book that reinforces what you are trying to accomplish in your unit.
- Identify two-three insights that you would like to see your team walk away from the experience with. Hone in on the parts of the book that develop these insights. Use your reading selections to emphasize those parts of the book and then craft questions that will spark conversation in those same areas.
- Establish a clear timeline and clear expectations up front.
- Order the book (or get copies of the article) well ahead of time, so that it arrives one month in advance.
- Personally give the participants their copy of the book, writing a personal note in the book. Let them know how important you think the program is for each person as well as for the collective unit.
- Start off each week's discussion with a team huddle, perhaps over breakfast or lunch, and spark conversation about what participants are getting out of the book.
- Have a facilitator for your online discussion group who stimulates conversation or leads discussion on to new points. You can lead the discussions yourself or rotate the role among your leaders.
- Consider inviting members of the profession who are outside the reading group to participate in the online discussions. Try posting an open invitation online or inviting specific people to join in.
- Culminate the experience by having each participant reflect upon the one or two main things they are taking away from the experience and putting into action. Have them post this to the online space.
(Also, see Chapter 9, "Making the Most of Online Conversations.")

Leaders who participate in the *Pro-Reading Challenge* are very intentional about choosing books that tie in with what they are trying to accomplish. They choose books that reinforce what they are already doing, and they situate the program and the conversations in the "now" experiences of their leaders. In other words, they focus their leaders on the "So what, how does this apply to us as a unit?"

Todd Schmidt, for example, wanted his leaders to gain insight into the culture, history, and religion of the region they would be operating in. *Taliban* met his intent. Scott Shaw had a more tactical focus; he chose a book that was chock-full of the same dilemmas that today's rifle platoon leaders face. Another company commander, George Corbari, wanted to raise his team's overall effectiveness. He selected *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* by John Maxwell. Thus, there is no one type of book that is best. The key is to be very intentional about your book choices and to integrate the reading into the current reality of your unit.

A pro-reading program that focuses on highly relevant content offers four notable benefits:

1. It creates a shared experience

When a leader team reads and talks about the same book, the ideas and language in the book become a shared experience that the team draws upon in the future. For example, discussing *The Killing Zone* enabled Scott Shaw and his lieutenants to be transported to the 1960s Vietnam that Fred Downs experienced. Specific experiences, insights, and even words serve as a sort of shorthand that is laden with the deeper meanings that emerged from their conversations. In Iraq, Scott can ask his platoon leaders if they have brought to bear all available assets and refer to Lieutenant Downs' NVA base camp attack. It's not just the example from the book, but the insights prompted by the discussions that are invoked when Scott refers to this attack.

Todd Schmidt also created some amazing shared experiences for his team through reading and talking about the book *Taliban*, listening to experts talk about the culture and history of Afghanistan, and experiencing the culture through its food, music, and incense. When they encountered shifting loyalties on the ground in Afghanistan, Todd's leaders had a more nuanced view of what was happening as a result of their book discussions. Having a shared frame of reference around critical issues is what separates good teams from great teams.

All of us have had the experience of being surprised when someone else drew very different conclusions from reading the same book we read. It causes us to think, "Did I miss something?" "Why didn't I see that?" This is a great stimulus for making new mental connections as was evident in the example that Scott Shaw

described, in which his lieutenants commented on what Lieutenant Downs had done. Differences in interpretation like this then become fertile ground for making new connections—causing us to rethink our assumptions and broaden our perspectives.

Discussing concrete situations that occurred in a book allows a team to be openly critical in ways that might be uncomfortable if the subject were a situation in which team members had been participants. Analyzing a mistake that Lieutenant Downs made is easy for the team to discuss—not so when the mistake was made by one of the lieutenants on the team.

2. It helps people retain knowledge

Discussion improves our ability to retain what we have read. How often have you read an article, but then three days later were unable to remember anything except a vague impression of what it was about? If, however, you had told your spouse about it, or made yourself some notes, or had a discussion with someone else who had read it, you would have increased the staying power of the ideas in the book tenfold. Three weeks later you would probably not remember the whole article, but you would very likely remember what you said in the discussion, the points you made, and the points that the other person made that surprised you. Research in learning shows that unless you “recall” (that is pull back into conscious memory) what you have learned within 24 hours, you will lose most of it. Todd Schmidt touched on this when he noted that the discussions caused people “to think deeper about what they were learning.”

3. It builds a sense of professional identity

Reading relevant materials such as military history creates a historical bond with our predecessors. It also creates a lateral bond with our fellow professionals, as we gain a shared understanding of who we are as members of this profession. For example, conversations about *Leadership, The Warrior’s Art* among the HHC/1-509th (ABN) leaders sparked local conversations throughout the Army.

The content of the reading and the lateral connections with other members of the profession are key factors in creating a sense of professional community. So, too, are the physical aspects of the program. Chris Kolenda provided the extra touch that makes an

impact when he personalized each book with an inscription. George Corbari told us that when he was a lieutenant, his company commander inscribed a copy of *A Message For Garcia* for him. The book took on much greater meaning for him over the years because of the inscription. When he did the same for his officers, George was passing on this legacy, and reinforcing the sense of being part of something greater than ourselves. CC provides a similar, though admittedly less personal, physical link between professionals when it supplies groups with books of their choice. Members of reading groups can hold up a copy of a book and say, “This was given to me by CC and inscribed by my commander.” In effect, the book represents their membership in the profession; it becomes their link to the past and the future.

4. It amplifies the impact of the learning

Leaders like Todd Schmidt, Scott Shaw, and George Corbari are leveraging the *Pro-Reading Challenge* to develop leaders and to improve their unit’s effectiveness. In addition to making it easier for them to accomplish their goals, the *Pro-Reading Challenge* amplifies what they are doing by making it visible to the rest of the profession through the online discussion. Leaders across the 1-509th (ABN), for example, were given access to thinking and insights about leadership that otherwise would have been hidden to them.

Just as these small groups have an impact on the wider profession as their conversation is amplified via the online space, so too does the wider profession influence the smaller group. The act of writing one’s thoughts down—declaring what you think—is valuable in itself. But it takes on new meaning when you know others will be reading what you think. Participants tend to be more thoughtful in their discussion posts knowing that their peers and other members of the profession may read what they write.

Our desire is that this chapter inspires you to use professional reading—fueled by conversation—as an integral part of how you develop your leaders and increase your unit’s effectiveness. Additionally, if you are working in the capacity of a topic lead or professional forum developer, this chapter makes the case that

professional forums can directly impact professional reading by providing resources and online space for leaders to “do” professional reading more effectively.

Key Concepts—Chapter 3

- A growing number of leaders are using professional reading as a catalyst for conversations within their units—shifting the emphasis from the reading to the conversation about the reading.
- When leader teams read relevant content together, the conversations that result shift individual learning curves and so improve unit effectiveness.
- Combining face-to-face and online conversation about the reading increases the impact of a reading program, with four notable benefits:
 1. It creates a shared experience which catalyzes insightful discussion and acts as a point of reference in later situations.
 2. It improves knowledge retention through the process of conversation, which includes reflection and articulation of what is being learned.
 3. It builds a sense of professional identity by creating lateral connections with fellow readers as well as historical bonds with past warriors.
 4. It amplifies the impact of the learning by making both the individual and the profession at large aware of the learning taking place.