

## A Good Book's Role in Professional Development



A simple question posed to Patrick Lawler 27 years ago inspired his appetite for business reading.

Lawler, the CEO of Youth Villages, was at a conference with Mary Lynn Cantrell, a leader in the field of children's mental and behavioral health. Cantrell casually asked what he was reading. And Lawler had to admit that he wasn't reading anything.

Then in his 20s, Lawler had young children and was working long hours just keeping Youth Villages afloat. But Cantrell's question, coupled with Lawler's need to learn more about the business of managing a nonprofit organization, spurred him to read. And as he and the organization faced new challenges, Lawler turned to reading to overcome them. Today, Lawler is a devoted reader, and his views about the value of reading fuel his desire to share the resources that have helped (and continue to help) him.

"Good leadership is a responsibility," he said during a recent interview. "It's important for people in leadership positions to be the person that helps others who are struggling." Reading and sharing books is one way he's striving to achieve that ideal. From resources on financial issues (*The Wealthy Barber*), to coping with tragedy (*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*), to dealing with back pain (*Foundation*), Lawler is always quick to identify and offer materials that may help an employee or colleague through difficult times.

He has also directly applied his appetite for reading and learning to helping staff develop professionally at Youth Villages, now one of the country's largest private providers of services to children with emotional and behavioral problems and their families. "Every month I send out an email to staff as part of our internal communications. I always share what I'm reading," said Lawler, "and, as a result, someone suggested I start a reading list." Lawler did so, putting it on Youth Villages' intranet and committing to updating it regularly. Generally, the list features ten books that are domain specific and ten more generally focused on management, leadership, and business.

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Lawler uses quarterly management meetings as an opportunity to highlight particular resources that might benefit staff. A table at the back of the meeting room is reserved for Lawler's book selection, which often include topics related to their work as well as self-help type books that address the "whole person." During the meeting, he'll pull up two or three books that address something the organization is facing. "The key is to get everyone in the organization inspired, and to look for ways to make things better here and change the lives of children and families," he said. Managers are encouraged to take a book, read it, and write reviews on the intranet. As an incentive, those who do get prizes and rewards, such as gear from the Youth Village's store, and often, they'll pass the book on to their staff or read it with them and have a discussion about it.

Ultimately, the resources being shared foster a culture of learning at Youth Villages, Lawler noted. "[Managers and staff] will tell me that they're struggling with something within their group and they're using these resources to help them improve," he said. "The reading list encourages them to continue to give feedback and continue to learn."

With his reading list, and the practices that have sprung up around it, Lawler is also tangibly acknowledging that managers and staff need time and space for reflection. He recounts a story about a business owner giving a man a tour of his factory. At the end of it, the man remarked, "Everyone looked so busy and productive, but toward the end we passed an office where a man was sitting with his feet up looking out the window." The owner replied, "That's Joe. Last year, he came up with an idea that saved us millions—now we let him sit around and think of his next great idea."

While it's certainly not always possible to let managers sit indefinitely with their feet up, thinking, Lawler's story does highlight a good point: "We're in reactive mode most of the time," he said. "Reading and writing helps you work through things more than you're able to going through the day."

### **Patrick Lawler's Must Reads for Nonprofit Leaders**

"Every book I've ever read has had some impact on what we do at Youth Villages," said Lawler. From personal self-help and finance books to advice on running and back pain, Lawler has an extensive list of books he regularly recommends. Here, we share, in his words, those he's elevated as must reads for nonprofit leaders, with two caveats. He did not include two of the most widely read books in the last 20 years: Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and Jim Collins' *Good to Great* series, because as he said, he suspects that you've already read them. If not, read them before you dive into his list of ten.

1. *The CEO Paradox: The Privilege and Accountability of Leadership*

By Thomas R. Horton

“This is the first book that told me how to be a CEO. Clear and simple, the book offers practical lessons on key topics. From it, I learned that my primary responsibility, the CEO’s most important role, is to prepare the organization for the future.”

2. *On Becoming a Leader*

By Warren Bennis

“Most business books share stories about a leader of a company and how he or she overcomes particular challenges. Others offer a lesson learned from business experience. Often these books all read alike, but not Bennis’ books. He has a way of sharing a business experience while extracting insight and, more importantly, wisdom. He brings out the best in every story and especially helped me understand the value of self reflection and obstacles. He writes so clearly about how reflection provides self awareness and leads to understandings. His chapter about moving through chaos helped me see that barriers and obstacles are a gift and includes one of my favorite quotes: ‘Everywhere you trip is where a treasure lies.’”

3. *Leadership Is an Art*

By Max DePree

“One of the first business books I read and a jewel filled with wisdom and wonderful stories about the culture and great employees at the Herman Miller Company. It taught me the value of building healthy relationships, diversity of ideas/people, and participative management. This may sound like common business practices today, but they were fairly new concepts in the 1980s. I especially loved how he wrote about creating an environment for staff of ‘realized potential.’”

4. *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*

By Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan

“Larry Bossidy teams up with Ram Charan—a genius and one of my favorite authors of all time. They help you think through your plan, create a successful strategy to execute, and develop a culture of getting things done. Successfully executing a plan year after year after year may be out of reach for most of us, but don’t pass this one up.”

5. *How to Act Like a CEO: 10 Rules for Getting to the Top and Staying There*

By D.A. Benton

“The title is so simplistic that some leaders might pass on this book. Don’t. It’s fantastic. The chapter: ‘Be yourself unless you’re a jerk,’ should be required reading by every CEO.”

6. *Boardroom Verities*

By Jerold Panas

“This book provides practical governance advice and offers insight into why board members choose to serve. This book helped me to understand what to look for in a potential board member and what responsibilities the board should have. It offers especially good advice about board members’ role in fundraising. Gaining significant financial support from board members is one of the key challenges that most nonprofits face.”

7. *The Executive in Action - Includes three books:*

*Managing for Results; Innovation and Entrepreneurship; The Effective Executive*

By Peter F. Drucker

“If you can select only one author and one book, Drucker is your guy and this is your book—all 700 pages. Of course, it may be cheating a little because this is three books in one. Running and leading a business can be very complex, but somehow Drucker can break it into small pieces and simplify it so even someone new to the business world (like I was in 1980) can understand. He is truly the Father of Business Management. You can have all of the leadership qualities on earth, but if you cannot successfully lead the day-to-day operation, you will never realize your and your organization’s full potential, and your organization will fail.”

8. *The Visionary’s Handbook: Nine Paradoxes That Will Shape the Future of Business*

By Watts Wacker, Jim Taylor, with Howard Means

“It’s the best book I’ve ever read on strategy. After you’ve finished creating your business plan, the book advises you to develop another plan assuming that completely different things happen. It’s the best advice for strategic planning and thinking.”

9. *Business Think: Rules for Getting it Right—Now, and No Matter What!*

By Dave Marcum, Steve Smith, and Mahan Khalsa

“I believe culture is everything—I mean everything! This book helps an organization develop sound institutional best practices and create a culture in the mind of its employees that things can be done better and in a new way. Nonprofits are the worst at thinking they are making a difference without any degree of evidence. This book helps organizations find creative, effective solutions to produce measurable results.”

10. *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful*

By Marshall Goldsmith with Mark Reiter

“If you are afraid of self reflection or insight, don't read this one. But if you want to truly be a better leader and are ready for some self-imposed constructive criticism, it's a must read. Goldsmith's experience in coaching CEOs gives us a window inside the heads and hearts of people that took his advice—and you can see the difference it made.”