How to Start a Professional Reading Group

Staying up to date on the latest management tools and techniques or keeping abreast of a quickly changing field can seem impossible for nonprofit managers who are knee deep in serving beneficiaries with ever-growing needs. However, those same resources managers don't have time to tap into could hold solutions to the very real issues they face in their organizations. Or, just as important, they might inspire the kinds of creative ideas that can help propel their work and their organizations forward.

One way to help nonprofit managers gain access to such potentially helpful materials is by starting a reading group for managers inside your organization. At Youth Villages, CEO Patrick Lawler began one simply by sharing what he was reading, via an email, with his staff. When someone suggested he start a reading list, he located it on the organization's intranet and also began sharing highlights in quarterly manager's meetings, offering incentives to those managers willing to read the books and offer their own reactions and views to colleagues on the intranet.

Here we share five simple steps to help you create a reading group that offers people time and space to reflect on resources important to their work.

1. **Gauge interest.** This isn't a "if you build it, they will come" moment. Reach out and let people know that you're interested in creating a reading group to help everyone stay abreast of trends in your field, gather and share new ideas, and, more important, give everyone new tools and strategies for overcoming challenges and making the organization stronger. If there isn't enough interest, hold off. Or start small, as Lawler did, by sharing what *you're* reading via an occasional email.
2. **Keep the group small.** Aim for having between five and eight people attend each meeting. Given varied schedules, inviting ten to 15 people to join is likely to ensure you'll have enough members attending each time you meet.
3. **Meet as often as doable.** While monthly sounds ideal, in a busy nonprofit it just might not be possible. Consider starting quarterly and then ramping up if the group feels it is able to meet more often. Or, as Lawler did, integrate the book discussions into a regularly scheduled meeting. If doing this, be sure to be organized so that people can easily break into groups and have ample time for discussion during the larger meeting.

4. **Have group participants report back on what they've learned.** By doing so, others will benefit as well. At Youth Villages, managers are rewarded with small incentives—such as Youth Villages gear and credits to shop at the organization's store—to share their resources on the intranet. One way to help members share what they've learned more broadly is to have group members take turns providing book summaries and take notes on (and share) the feedback everyone gives during the discussion. At Youth Villages, Lawler has heard that managers bring resources back to their groups to the help them collectively tackle particular challenges they are facing. "The reading list encourages them to continue to give feedback and to continue learning," said Lawler.
5. **Build your organization's library and refer to it often.** Your mindset in starting this group should be to build a growing resource for managers and other staff to tap as they develop in their roles and face new challenges. Be sure that the materials are located in a central place, whether on a book shelf or the organization's intranet, and that you are referring to the library and individual resources as often as is relevant. Keeping helpful resources top of mind will remind managers and staff that they have support at the ready to help them face the day-to-day challenges of their work.