



THE INC. LIFE

24 Inspiring Books Every Business Leader Should Read

Take some suggestions from these executives and high-achieving leaders.



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A good book can be an escape from reality, an inciter of tears—or, for people intent on self-improvement—a sage tutor. Whatever you're looking for, here are quotes from two dozen executives who name their favorite book and explain why it's worth reading.

1. *Tap Dancing to Work: Warren Buffett on Practically Everything, 1966-2012* by Carol J. Loomis

"This book walks you through the historic rise of Warren Buffett from an Omaha hedge fund manager to legendary business oracle. Mr. Buffett's 'forever-business' genius comes through clearly, making this a must-read for any executive. I received this book shortly after joining a Berkshire Hathaway-owned company, and it has not only shaped my outlook on business opportunities, but also my personal strategy on investments."

—Brad Rutta, vice president of strategic partnerships and innovation, Berkshire Hathaway Travel Protection

2. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams

"This book punches way beyond its weight in dispensing inadvertent wisdom for life and business. In fact, its opening salvo could serve as an excellent guide to handling most business crises, as in 'Don't Panic!' With tongue firmly implanted in cheek, it pushes us to question all our routines and rituals—which actually underscores the subtle insanity of most of our assumptions in life and business. For example, would you rather eat an animal that doesn't want to be eaten, or eat an animal that was bred to want to be eaten? An important takeaway is that we should constantly strive to take a fresh perspective on old issues. Strength can often be weakness and vice versa, and it often depends simply on how you look at it. However, most of all the book affirms that life is just a magnificent experiment, anyway, so go

ahead and try new experiences and approaches. Throughout the voyage, we're accompanied by Adams's wickedly wacky humor, an essential antidote to all of life's ups and downs. As an old adage goes, life is too important to take seriously."

—Kon Leong, founder and CEO of data archiving software company ZL Technologies

3. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* by Angela Duckworth

"It recognizes that there are many qualities, outside of innate talent, that can impact an individual's trajectory in life. Angela defines talent as the quality that enables individuals to get better at something more rapidly than their peers. However, she explains that while talent is extraordinary, it can become a distraction. She interviewed high achievers, from bankers to cartoonists, and conducted field research in areas as diverse as West Point Military Academy and the National Spelling Bee. Her research is inspirational because it validates the belief that we are capable of achieving greatness as long as we're willing to ceaselessly pursue our dreams, no matter the obstacles.

—Lori Mitchell-Keller, global general manager of consumer industries for the software company SAP

4. *Born to Run* by Christopher McDougall

"In this book, alongside the fascinating research on the ancient tribe of Tarahumara, McDougall delves into why the human species, unique among other primates, has developed traits for endurance running. I promise that after reading this book you will have an urge to go outside and run. Every executive, particularly CEOs, experience high levels of stress and tension. For me, one of the best ways to relieve this stress is through exercise. If you're an executive who finds yourself in a new hotel every other day, take advantage of this. Put on your jogging shoes and explore the world."

—Ofer Amitai, CEO of network security provider Portnox

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5. *Outliers* by Malcom Gladwell

"This book stopped me in my tracks, and made me think. While we take so much for granted around why things work or why people are successful, this book looks at all factors and highlights their meaning. Gladwell lays out that the time of year you were born could greatly affect your chance of making the NHL, and I find this fact unbelievable. Gladwell's following quote sums up why I love this book: 'It struck me that our understanding of success was really crude—and there was an opportunity to dig down and come up with a better set of explanations.' *Outliers* has now made me ask 'why' more than ever before."

—Leigh Barnes, North America director at small group adventure travel company Intrepid Travel

6. *Leaders Eat Last* by Simon Sinek

"Simon Sinek is incredibly in touch with what it takes to run successful companies today. In this book, he clearly explains the behaviors of good leaders and how they can create an environment of trust, collaboration, and dedication in their teams. Old methods of leadership are losing effectiveness in today's complex world of speed, innovation, and the Millennial work force. Adapt or fail."

—David L. Inns, CEO of GreatCall Inc., a provider of active aging and independent living solutions

7. *Shoe Dog: A Memoir by the Creator of Nike* by Phil Knight

"It's the ultimate story of a founder willing to endure the greatest of hardships in business, all by putting his dream and mission first. Phil goes into incredible detail about the physical and mental stress he endured while building what is now a global empire. He proves that persistence always wins, and greatness only stops when you do. An empowering memoir that will challenge and resonate with just about anyone."

—Vishaal Melwani, CEO of the men's clothing company Combatant Gentlemen

"The book tells the story of Nike from the perspective of its founder. It's a fascinating entrepreneurship memoir told against a background of persistence and grit. For example, during Nike's first five years, Knight had to work full time at another job. He also talks of how he repeatedly made high-risk decisions and was at the brink of losing everything multiple times. The book is a story of struggle, but more importantly, it's one of perseverance. Personally, as a bootstrapper who has taken a decade to slowly build my own company, this book has been a great source of inspiration and morale. I highly recommend this book to any entrepreneur."

—Aytekin Tank, CEO of the online form provider JotForm

8. *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* by Thomas Friedman

"It reminds us that technology can help us solve many problems, including ones relevant to the job space where I work. Instead of merely seeing technology as taking away jobs—which to some degree it is—the book reminds us that technology can also be extremely effective in empowering people to find their fit in the new economy. This could mean matching displaced workers with new careers based on their strengths or employing large-scale online training programs. The book is an inspiring message of how technology can be used to help our employees in the new economy rather than hurt them."

—Frida Polli, co-founder and CEO of talent assessment system Pymetrics

9. *Woo, Wow, and Win* by Thomas A. Stewart and Patricia O'Connell

"This is a deceptively simple book that opened my mind to their term 'Service Design.' [It is a] proactive, productive, and mutually profitable experience that can be applied to any industry for any client. Ahh instead of Ow."

–Mark Silver, partner at *Factory PR*, a fashion and lifestyle public relations company

10. *Good to Great* by Jim Collins

"I love the quote 'Good is the Enemy of Great.' It's something I really take to heart as a leader. In our organization, if we ever think we are good enough, then we stop trying to improve and we will never be great. This is why we constantly challenge ourselves in everything that we do to ensure we are on the path of continuous improvement. Whether it's relating to our technology, our processes, our franchisee support, or how we implement our company values, our culture never accepts that we are good enough, and that is what makes us a great company."

–Matthew Eichhorst, president of *Expedia CruiseShipCenters*, which offers cruise vacations through 225 locations across North America

11. *Start With Why* by Simon Sinek

"Most companies start with what they do, then they look at how they do it, and very rarely look at why they are doing it. Successful companies and people start with the 'why' they do what they do. With this mentality, we were able to grow our Big Frog franchise system, rooted in 'fun,' to over 70 locations, on track to add 18 to 20 this year. Simon is an anthropologist with a tremendous insight in the business aspect of how people think."

–Leeward Bean, CEO of *Big Frog Custom T-Shirts & More*, a garment decorating franchise concept where customers design their own apparel

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12. *Traction* by Gino Wickman

"At the time we read the book as an executive team, our business struggled at creating alignment in working toward goals, and at having a strong internal and external communication model. During the past three years, we have applied and fine-tuned the concepts outlined in *Traction*. We are dramatically more connected as a team, both with our communications and with the realization of our goals. The best part is, we are having so much fun as we embrace our mission of "serving amazing..."

–Sean Collins, CEO of *Costa Vida Fresh Mexican Grill*, a Utah-based fast-casual Mexican cuisine franchise

13. *E-Myth* by Michael E. Gerber

"Why do so many small businesses fail? How can I protect myself and scale my business? Providing answers to those questions, *E-Myth* is a must-read for business owners, entrepreneurs, or anyone thinking of leaving a job to go out on their own. It hugely impacted both my life and businesses, causing me to literally change the way I operated my companies. A practical guide to understanding the roadblocks and pitfalls of an entrepreneur's journey, this book emphasizes how building a healthy business relies on scalable, repeatable processes. Upon learning this, I immediately began creating processes assuming that the employee was hired yesterday and then built systems to support and reinforce them. *E-Myth* educated me on process and accountability. It was the catalyst for the journey that I am on now."

–Steve Cody, founder and CEO of *The Better Software Company*, which provides software to franchisors and multi-location businesses to improve and simplify operations

14. *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theater and Every Business a Stage* by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore

"The book was the first real attempt to codify what a customer-centric organization should be and provides examples highlighting why it's important, from the vantage point of the customer and the evolution of society. Although published in 1999, still today only a few organizations have become true experiential brands, despite many companies aspiring to be. The authors describe why many companies fail to achieve this, which outlines the core principles of the book. The book includes a number of examples that dive deep into the experience of entrepreneurs as they strive and struggle to achieve a deep and rich level of success."

–Alvaro Pombo, CEO of *ProntoForms*, provider of mobile and customizable forms for business

15. *The Ideal Team Player* by Patrick M. Lencioni

"This book provided the most concise method I have come across to identify and hire an inspired team. When you love what you do, work becomes enjoyable, but when you couple the work you love with team players...that is where inspiration and the power of teams comes alive. Without it, there is no joy, but with it, you can build an amazing workplace. Lencioni has written many impactful books but this one changed how I look for talent by simplifying the process to source ideal team players. It's all about looking for hungry, humble, and smart first and then focusing on the skills and capabilities second. That's how I strive to build a workplace where people are inspiring, the work is inspiring...everything is inspiring."

–Steve Elliott, founder and CEO of *AgileCraft*, a software company focused on helping large enterprises simplify software at scale

16. *The Five Love Languages, Singles Edition* by Gary Chapman

"In life, you don't necessarily realize how others react to your efforts to connect. Most people aspire to be treated as they believe they would treat you. The key to maximizing your connection to others is to identify which love language—words of affirmation, gifts, acts of service, quality time, physical touch—individuals respond to the best regardless of the situation. As with all of my properties, we seek employees whose primary language is acts of service. However, it is important that everyone attune to what the primary language is of our guests and those we seek to please. By understanding and practicing the five love languages, I've dramatically impacted my business to be more effective and profitable by approaching each team member with their preferred language for maximum results."

—Michael Achenbaum, co-owner and partner of the lifestyle hospitality brand *Gansevoort Hotel Group*

17. *Faster Than Lightning: My Autobiography* by Usain Bolt

"You do not have to be a fan of track and field to enjoy this book. Usain Bolt, who came from very humble beginnings and rose to the king of the track, embodies the popular 'hard work pays off' philosophy. His achievements are unprecedented in the track world, and upon reading his book chronicling his journey of sacrifice—in which he overcomes obstacles while staying true to himself—you think, 'This could be a winning formula for anyone who wants to be successful in business.'"

—John Issa, executive chairman of *SuperClubs*, a collection of hotels and resorts

18 and 19. *Investment Biker and Adventure Capitalist, The Ultimate Road Trip* by Jim Rogers

"Jim Rogers was dubbed the 'Indiana Jones of finance' by *Time* magazine. I discovered his first book, *Investment Biker*, an incredible recounting of his year-long investing trip around the world in the 1990s, while I was in college. As a business student, it encouraged me to travel for a year in South America after graduation, which holds up today as one of the best years of my life. A few years later, while working in real estate development in California, I read his follow up story about a three-year drive around the world: *Adventure Capitalist, The Ultimate Road Trip*. It inspired me to explore opportunities abroad again, ultimately working on hotel projects on several different continents, an experience that brought me to my current position as co-founder of Proper Hospitality, a high-end lifestyle hotel company. Both books are fascinating stories that uniquely combine the excitement of travel with insight into Jim's philosophy of economics and his opinions regarding the investment climate around the globe. Highly recommended for anyone who has a love for both business and travel/adventure/other cultures."

—Brian De Lowe, co-founder and president of *Proper Hospitality*, which designs, brands, and operates high-end lifestyle hospitality experiences under the *Proper Hotels and Residences* and *Avalon Hotels* brands

20. *The War of Art* by Steven Pressfield

"He talks about the two lives we all lead, the lived and the unlived, and the resistance that stands between them. By separating the concept of resistance as a force that prevents us from achieving something from the reality of resistance, which is that it can be depersonalized and overcome, I found this book empowered me in a way no other reading had. He brings validity to the thoughts we have every day. He says if you find yourself asking your friends and yourself if you are really an artist/writer/creator, chances are you are. The counterfeit innovator, he says, is wildly self-confident. 'The real one is scared to death.' Amen."

—Umber Ahmad, founder and head chef of *Mah-Ze-Dahr Bakery*

21. *The Innovator's Dilemma* by Clayton M. Christensen

"His book became my roadmap for disrupting the headphone industry with Skullcandy and now the grill business with Traeger Grills. Christensen shows that when leaders act in their company's best short-term financial interests—when they do exactly what they're supposed to do—they tend to reject innovation and succumb to disruptive competitors. Disruptive technologies do not have a high ROI initially. Thus, the 'dilemma' is figuring out which innovations to pursue and which to ignore. *The Innovator's Dilemma* challenges you to stay on offense and execute with confidence, knowing that if you are afraid to adapt, somebody else isn't."

—Jeremy Andrus, CEO at *Traeger Wood-Fired Grills*

22. *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff and It's All Small Stuff: Simple Ways to Keep the Little Things From Taking Over Your Life* by Richard Carlson

"The title alone of this book has been a great lesson for me, and I think it is something that every leader has to do or learn to get comfortable with to manage stress and stay productive, effective, and happy in their role. Before I was CEO, running was my main stress reliever and it worked well, to a point, but then someone shared this book with me and it helped me figure out ways to further reduce stress and also recognize where I was allowing stress to creep into my life unnecessarily and affect how I was operating or interacting with others. I feel very lucky to run an amazing organization like *Back on My Feet*—this is a real passion and mission, not just a job—and that in itself can make it very hard to switch off the email, laptop, or phone and take a moment to yourself. This book helps show you small, practical ways to cut out the noise and focus on what is really important, not just at work but in life."

—Katy Sherratt, CEO of *Back on My Feet*, a national organization operating in 12 major cities that combats homelessness through the power of running, community support, and essential employment and housing resources

23. *Natural Health, Natural Medicine* by Dr. Andrew Weil

"I don't go a month without referring back to this book. Dr. Weil's philosophy of health addresses mind, body, and spirit, and focuses on achieving optimal health. He changed the way I think about my body and helped me to achieve greater levels of energy, balance, and mindfulness as a mother, two-time entrepreneur, and three-time cancer survivor. Since beginning AWE, I've needed to be even more disciplined, and deliberate, to find balance. I frequently rely on the mindfulness and meditation practices he teaches to offset the additional workload and demands of running a second business. I recommend his book to those looking to learn more about a holistic and integrative approach to health and well-being, or to those interested in preventative medicine."

–Jill Johnson, founder and creative director of AWE, a New York City-based jewelry line designed to celebrate, unite, and honor survivors

24. *Positively Outrageous Service* by T. Scott Gross

"[It] highlights how top companies go way beyond satisfying their customers to making them fans, and why you should do this in your company. The stories are entertaining, the tips are easy to understand and to adopt, and the value to a company in building an amazing customer experience should be fantastic."

–Ron Bender, vice president of franchise development for Big Frog Custom T-Shirts & More, a garment decorating franchise concept where customers design their own apparel

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NOTES TO MY YOUNGER SELF

The 2 Famous Quotes That Taught Me Everything I Need to Know About Success

This founder looks back at two quotes that set him up for success in his entrepreneurial journey.



By Paul Metselaar [@OvationTravel](#)



CREDIT: Courtesy Subject; Hill Hudson

Editor's note: We asked noted entrepreneurs to reflect on what they wish they'd known starting out and to put it in a letter to their younger selves. Paul Metselaar founded Ovation, one of the largest corporate travel management companies in the nation and a 5-time honoree on

the Inc. 5000 list of fastest-growing private companies in the U.S.

Dear Paul,

As a teenager you'll have worked at your parents' travel company that put together summer tours for teenagers. One of the signs hanging in the office, which you'll never forget, is a variation of Joseph Heller's famous line: "**Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you.**" To you, it's a tongue-and-cheek way of **staying motivated**, to always strive to do better. The true meaning of the sign won't sink in until you start law school. You'll come out of an Ivy League undergraduate program, and think you're so smart and educated that you can just coast through and ace your courses. By the time first year grades and ranks are posted, you'll have had a rude awakening as you significantly **underperformed your own expectations**. The good news is that that experience motivates you to study harder, and you'll begin to improve.

In the future, you'll use the same principle in business, and joke about it all the time with your executive team. Despite the fact that you'll have built a successful business that has many prominent clients and does over a billion dollars in travel bookings, you'll still be weary about thinking you've "made it," because that feeling can morph into overconfidence. When that happens you'll stop pushing yourself. It's important for you to be a little bit paranoid, i.e., to assume that your competitors have people who are smarter than you are, and that they're working hard to gain on you. You'll learn that when you start thinking you're the smartest person in the room, you stop growing and cease to be innovative.

Related, the other adage that'll serve you well is Calvin Coolidge's notion that "**Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence.**" You'll quit law to take over your father's small travel agency in 1984, and you won't have many clients or prospects. One of the biggest reasons Ovation will continue to grow is because you'll never give up. Most of your larger clients (many of whom have been with you for decades) were not won the first time you bid for their business. Sometimes not even the second. Your sales team will often understandably be disappointed when this happens, because they just look at it as a loss. You'll always say: "That's not the right way look at it. We did not lose. We just didn't win this client yet."

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Because you're an optimist by nature, whenever something bad happens, your instinct is to look on the bright side. If you don't win a bid, you'll look at why that didn't happen, where you can improve and how you can position yourself better. Your number one strategy will become persistence and perseverance. Whether it's grades or business, the lesson is to find what motivates you and to always strive to improve. There's no such thing as losing, only bumps in the road that make you stronger and help you to succeed; just keep at it after your competitors have quit or are resting on their laurels.

Persistence Is Often Your Only Ally

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