



Techniques for Leading a Book Discussion



Ref: (a) MCRP 6-12B w ch/1 *Marine Corps Values: A User's Guide for Discussion Leaders*, Chapter 1 "Discussion Leading Techniques"

1. **Background.** The objectives of the Professional Reading Program are to enhance the warrior ethos of the Corps, encourage critical thinking, and broaden understanding of the current operating environment. A well executed guided discussion develops leaders by improving the participants' ability to think through a problem and communicate ideas to a group that includes subordinates, peers and seniors. Leadership encompasses more than the ability to make snap decisions with minimal input. When time permits a more thorough approach to planning, leaders should be able to listen to and evaluate other Marines' opinions and analyses of facts to reach a decision.

2. **Preparation.** Since a guided discussion takes more time than a lecture, adequate preparation is necessary to get the most out of the time spent. The first step as leader is to read the book yourself and prepare your discussion points. Enclosure (1) gives you a template for organizing your discussion points. Once you have read the book and identified the key issues, use the following planning factors to set up the group discussion:

a. **Size.** Fire team-sized to squad-sized groups (13 including the discussion leader) work best. Since the goal is for you all hands to participate, 20 participants is the absolute maximum even for an experienced discussion leader. Match the group size to the group leader's ability to keep the discussion on track.

b. **Attitude.** Discussion leaders need to know the Marines in the discussion group. Reading may not be high on their list of things they enjoy. Share the following with those who question the value of reading: (From a FEB 2004 response by MGen J. N. Mattis, USMC to a former subordinate who told him the Air Force did not have a reading list):

"The problem with being too busy to read is that you learn by experience... i.e. the hard way. By reading, you learn through others' experiences, generally a better way to do business, especially in our line of work where the consequences of incompetence are so final for young men. Thanks to my reading, I have never been caught flatfooted by any situation . . . It doesn't give me all the answers, but it lights what is so often a dark path ahead."

c. **Location.** The setting should allow the group to concentrate on the discussion without interruption. Classrooms are designed to minimize distractions (no telephones, no worrying about the weather) but "school circles" are preferable to classroom/lecture style seating. Common areas in barracks or aboard ship can be used so long as the discussion group is not competing with other users and their users and their leisure activities (TV, music, etc.)





d. Unity of Effort . Professional reading is a part of every Marine’s professional military education (PME). The purpose of PME is to build creative, thinking leaders. The Corps divides responsibility for PME three ways: the individual Marine, the commander, and the formal schools. The discussion leader is a vital link between the individual and the commander. Book discussions need to focus on creating smarter, more adaptable warfighters. Just as the martial arts program balances fighting skills with character development, book discussions complement individual and unit training. Good training builds on individual skills to make the unit more mission ready. Book discussions need to be approached the same way. While the purpose is to grow the next generation of leaders, a side benefit is Marines learn more about each other and the leader learns more about his Marines.

e. Time. Doing a good job reading and discussing a few books is better than doing a poor job reading and discussing a lot of books. Book discussions can be targets of opportunity as a “hip pocket” event to fill in the time waiting for the next event in the training schedule. But that approach only works if the leader and participants are prepared. Discussion leaders need to be flexible, prepared to discuss a book in parts if the available time does not allow you to cover the whole book at once.

f. Equipment. Discussions of books such as *Rifleman Dodd*, the portions of *The Ugly American* dealing with counterinsurgency tactics, and *The Village* can be made better with a terrain model, sand table or situation map. If creating graphic training aids supports the discussion, take the time to create them and use them. In fact, building a terrain model or creating a map for the discussion is useful training on its own. Ensure the training aids you employ - even if it is just a sheet of paper for keeping track of “who’s who” in *Gates of Fire* - support rather than take over the discussion. Power point presentations are not a requirement for book discussions.

3. Execution. The leader does more preparation, but everyone has to at least read the book before the discussion can begin. You know your Marines and what they have on their task list best. Set a reasonable prep time, stick to it and then use the following guidelines to carry out the discussion:

a. Facilitate. Keep the discussion on track, get people to speak up and support their answers, either with a specific extract from the book or their own experiences.

(1) Make eye contact.

(2) Make it clear that everyone will get a chance to talk so don’t interrupt, but discussions are for the whole group – not just for the person next to you.

(3) Controversy and conflicting opinions are fine, but don’t let the discussion become a destructive argument. Keep it professional, not personal.





(4) Address questions directly to a specific individual, or to the group as a whole. After a participant gives an answer, the leader should occasionally ask another participant “What do you think about what was just said? Do you agree with PFC Charlo or PFC Michels?”

(5) Participants may ask the discussion leader questions. Even if you anticipated the question and prepared an answer, it may be better to redirect the question to the whole group, to another individual or even back to the person raising the question by saying “Good point. What do you think the answer is?”

(6) Stay aware of the time. You do not have to cover every point or ask every question you prepared, but you don’t want to get bogged down either. Even though the majority of the group is most interested in one issue, remember there may be other members more interested in another issue.

(7) Don’t let a participant give you a verbal book report. Challenge Marines to defend their opinions. Play devil’s advocate from time to time and disagree with someone just to get him to develop a stronger argument.

(8) As the discussion leader, you might genuinely disagree with every one else. Use your best judgment to get past the disagreement. If the others’ beliefs on a matter of fact suggests they don’t fully understand the consequences of their attitudes, suspend the discussion and engage as a senior Marine taking charge to correct a junior Marine. If the other members of the group have beliefs on a matter open to individual opinion and their beliefs are contrary to yours, don’t try to convince everyone to agree with your view because you are the leader.

For example, if you are leading a discussion of *Rifleman Dodd* and everyone feels methods used by the French battalion to discover where the Portuguese villagers hid their food were justifiable under military necessity and you know that those interrogation techniques described are nothing but torture, then make sure your Marines understand their obligation to abide by the torture, then make sure your Marines understand their obligation to abide by the law of land warfare. But if you and your group disagree over Dodd’s decision to move on to sabotage the French river crossing effort instead of remaining with the Portuguese guerilla fighters who were looking to him for leadership, don’t feel you have failed as a discussion leader if everyone does not agree with your conclusion. You have accomplished your mission by getting people to think and communicate.

b. Summarize. Task one member to serve as a recorder and rotate that task with each discussion. The recorder provides the group with the summary of their discussion, to include key take aways and points of disagreement. Evaluate the accuracy of the summary – this will tell you something about your Marines’ ability to make accurate notes at a briefing. Periodic summaries during the discussion may also be helpful to transition to a new topic, to link together the insights raised by two or more participants, or to bring the group back on track.





c. Internal Feedback. End each discussion with a critique of what your group accomplished, what lessons were learned and an honest appraisal of your performance as discussion leader. Identify those who made noteworthy contributions. After the group disperses, follow up with those who made little or no contribution. You need to know if they have trouble reading or comprehending what they read.

d. Feedback to the Command. The Commandant's message to all Marines (ALMAR 030/07 signed 05 JUN 07) clearly stated commanding officers are expected to use professional reading and discussions in the development of Marines as leaders, thinkers and fighters. Commanding officers then tasked subordinate leaders to take the time from some other effort to prepare for and lead discussions. Commanding officers need feedback from the discussion leaders to determine the following:

(1) Was the time allocated sufficient or did we waste time?

(2) What topic, question or key point proved to be the most effective in discussing Book A, so the next time another leader discusses Book A he doesn't have to discover the key take away for himself?

(3) Does the template (Encl (1)) work or should it be modified?

(4) Did anything read or discussed start anyone thinking about a better way to do your mission, execute your other training, or leading your Marines?

(5) Did you identify any deficiencies in your Marines training and education that needs to be remediated (refer to *Rifleman Dodd* example of operational law above)?

(6) Did you identify any Marine whose reading ability and reading comprehension causes concern? Have you checked that Marine's progress on his MOS roadmap to see if the problem with reading is holding that Marine back?

