

# Reading - The Hidden Success Factor

By Dr. Alan Zimmerman

*"Some people will lie, cheat, steal and back-stab to get ahead... and to think, all they have to do is READ." Fortune Magazine*

Ever since I taught at the university, I've always advocated a simple principle ... and that is ... you shouldn't waste your time learning things that won't make you happier or more successful. And throughout the hundreds of articles and books that I've published, I've described in great detail all those things you should learn ... things that WILL make you happier and more successful.

However, I need to apologize. I've been remiss. In all my writings, I've never addressed one of the most important things you MUST do to achieve extraordinary success at work as well as at home. Reading. You must become an excellent reader, no matter what age you are, and you must take time to read on a regular basis.

**Why so?**

## **1. Poor reading skills ... or a failure to keep on reading ... is a set-up for failure.**

Don't ever be fooled by the stupid slogan that says, "Ignorance is bliss." As success researcher Jim Rohn said so well, "Ignorance is not bliss. Ignorance is poverty. Ignorance is devastation. Ignorance is tragedy. Ignorance is illness. It all stems from ignorance."

We know, for example, that there is a strong connection between your reading skills and your academic success. And there is a building body of evidence that shows a connection between your reading skills and reading activity and your business success as well as relationship success.

Obviously, there are a few people who manage to do very well for themselves without the ability to read, but they are by far the exception, as is evidenced by the headlines that flood the news outlets when the secret is revealed.

More than ever, those with reading deficiencies will be crippled by them ... far more than most physical disabilities they might have. With technology constantly advancing and phasing out menial jobs, those who can't read ... or can't read well ... or don't take the time to read ... will be hard pressed to find long-term work.

Worse yet, BeginToRead.com says illiteracy and crime are closely related. The Department of Justice states, "The link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is welded to reading failure." Over 70% of inmates in America's prisons cannot read above a fourth grade level.

Simply put, if can't read well or if you don't take time to read some of the great stuff coming out in every possible field, you are condemning yourself to a very bleak personal and professional future.

So please, please, please, don't cop out and say you're too busy to read what you need to learn to improve your life, your relationships, and your career. As Confucius said centuries ago, "No matter how busy you may think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance." And that is something you cannot afford.

If you will take the time to improve your reading skills and/or increase your reading time, you can expect to receive a host of benefits.

## **2. Reading success leads to academic success.**

As educator and author Todd Christian observed, "It's not a coincidence that the students who excel academically are the same kids who seem to constantly have a novel as they walk from class to class. In my years of teaching, I cannot recall ever issuing a single failing grade to one of those book lovers."

Despite the irrefutable connection between reading success and academic success, it's somewhat amazing how little time our culture devotes to this vital skill. At present, parents and educators only have a few days ... a fraction of the child's whole life to get them set up for success.

A school year is approximately 140 days long, if you account for some vacation time and sick time. Kindergarten through the end of third grade is 4 years of schooling x 140 days or 560 days total. Your average life span is around 70 years or 25,550 days. In essence, all we have is about 2% of a child's lifetime to give them reading skills that will have an impact on them for the remaining 98% of their lives!

If you're a parent, get your kids to read more and more. And if you're a team leader, supervisor, or manager, get your team mates on a reading schedule. After all, the National Reading Panel 2000 concluded, "There is ample evidence that one of the major differences between poor and good readers is the difference in the quantity of total time they spend reading."

## **3. Reading activity leads to professional success.**

W. Fusselman proclaimed, "Today a reader, tomorrow a leader." And President Harry S. Truman told everyone, "Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers."

From first-hand experience I know that is the truth. As a professional speaker, I've had the opportunity to speak in hundreds and hundreds of organizations. And I've worked directly with many of their top leaders, and they're always talking about what they're reading and what they're learning.

Just this last week, I spoke at an incredibly innovative, tech-savvy, communication company. As I was eating dinner, the President turned to me and asked what was the best book I've read recently and shared the books that had the biggest impact on her personal and professional lives.

The experience was not an unusual one for me. Time after time, I've had Presidents, CEO's, CFO's, VP's, business owners and the like talk to me about the books they're reading and the difference it's making. I know for a fact that leaders are readers.

The lesson seems to be inescapable. If you want to get ahead, be better, or have more, you need to be an active reader.

## **4. Reading opens up a world of opportunities.**

It was one of Walt Disney's secrets of success. He knew "there is more treasure in books than in all the pirate's loot on Treasure Island."

And Todd Christian went on to say, "One thing is undeniable: being able to read and comprehend at a high level not only improves your chances of success, but it opens up an infinite variety of avenues of success for your choosing."

You see ... if you are a poor reader or if you don't bother to read, you can get by in life and at work with a well-honed skill. But chances are, that's where you'll be stuck all your life. You'll be on narrow, single-lane road, with no exits. However, with the ability to learn on your own through reading, the roads to success can be as numerous and wide as a Texas road map. For those who read actively and enthusiastically, for those who are hungry to learn, every road branches into new possibilities, and their adaptability and broad range of knowledge will allow them to exit at any time and simply choose another route.

As Joseph Brodsky notes, "There are worse crimes than burning books. One of them is not reading them." And finally, to make reading work for you, to make reading a part of your pathway to success, there's one more thing you've got to do.

## 5. Read before you need to.

When I finish my presentations at association or company meetings, a vast number of people will rush to the back of the room to buy my books. Of course that's nice. I'm hoping they'll read something that will make a big, positive, and lasting difference.

It's even nicer yet when some of those people write me later to tell me how my book changed their lives or their careers.

Unfortunately, I also receive a number of sad notes, all with the same theme: "If only I had read this book years ago." One man told me, "If I had read your book on 'THE BRAVE QUESTION PAYOFF: Building Better Relationships By Asking All The Right Questions,' I would still be married. I finally understand what my wife was talking about when she said we never communicated. Now I know how to build a better relationship, but my wife is gone."

Another person said, "I was promoted to supervisor because I was really good at what I did, but I never got any real training in how to lead or motivate anyone else. So I just stumbled along in my new role and ended up creating a negative work environment with poor morale. If only I had read your book on 'PIVOT: How One Turn In Attitude Can Lead To Success,' I could have saved a lot of hurt feelings and turmoil in my department."

And just this last week, someone else emailed me, saying, "Our leaders are always talking about the importance of exceptional customer service, and I'm all for getting better at customer service. The question is ... 'HOW are we supposed to do it?' Then someone gave me a copy of your book on 'The Service Payoff: How Customer Service Champions Outserve And Outlast The Competition.' What a godsend. If only we had this material in our department a long time ago, we'd be so much further ahead today in building customer loyalty."

As I finish this article, you may be tempted to think that an article on reading is rather elementary ... even beneath you. But don't ever minimize the importance of reading ... or even teaching reading to your kids or team mates. As Louisa Moats puts it, "Teaching reading IS rocket science."

And William Faulkner, one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, summarized his philosophy of success by saying, "Read, read, read."



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