

Recommended Reading From an Employee-Owned Company

By **SIMONA COVEL**

Michael Quarrey, general manager at Web Industries, Inc. of Hartford, found business books boring and hadn't read any in years. Then he and some co-workers heard about "Ideas Are Free" by Alan G. Robinson and Dean M. Schroeder from leaders of a nearby company. The book is about tapping employees' ideas to lift a company's bottom line.

They decided to read it together.

Soon after, another Web Industries employee picked up "Kanban Made Simple," a guide for adopting Kanban, [Toyota Motor Corp.](#)'s just-in-time manufacturing process by John M. Gross and Kenneth R. McInnis. Within weeks, other employees were reading it. A group of machine operators used the book's ideas to slash chronic late deliveries and improve scheduling processes.

In the 18 months since Mr. Quarrey picked up "Ideas Are Free," he's gotten back into business books – largely because of his enthusiastic employees. Web Industries, a Hartford, Conn., manufacturer, is a 100% employee-owned company. "It's a very weird experience to be in your factory and have people comparing business books they've read," he says.

Mr. Quarrey says the employee-ownership culture can get employees – from machine operators to salespeople – to take the initiative to change the way the business is run. "Decision-making is not all centralized, so a lot of it happens very organically," he says. Employees figure out how to solve their own problems. That often means reading a book, or even taking a college course.

These days, employees in different divisions of the company will request a book they've heard about, and the company will purchase enough copies for everyone who's interested in reading it.

Here are the titles that have been on their reading list, as well a resource for learning more about employee ownership, and what Mr. Quarrey likes about each one:

"Ideas Are Free: How the Idea Revolution Is Liberating People and Transforming Organizations" by Alan G. Robinson and Dean M. Schroeder

"Competitors can copy big ideas, so you need a systematic approach to generate as many small ideas as you can, and you need to measure them... It's a natural fit with an employee-owned company. You're an owner, and this is what you should be doing – coming up with ideas that benefit us all."

"The Gold Mine: A Novel of Lean Turnaround" by Freddy Ballé and Michael Ballé

"This business novel tells the story of a manufacturing company. It's a lean-manufacturing transformation story. There's a lot of human story, but it teaches practical tools, like making only as much [of the product] as the customer wants to buy, at the rate they want to buy it."

"The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable" by Patrick Lencioni

"It's also a novel and a quick read. It teaches a model of teamwork that's based on trusting one another enough to hold each other together as a team – while you debate and have vigorous conflict around each idea. We're following this model, and we've had huge breakthroughs – growth in market segments where we didn't have a clear plan."

"It's Your Ship: Management Techniques From the Best Damn Ship in the Navy" by D. Michael Abrashoff

"It's about a Navy ship that was constantly underperforming and, through culture, became what they called 'the best damn ship in the Navy.' This book swept through the organization. Now we talk about it routinely: How do we become the best damn division in the company? We want to be the best damn supplier to our customers."

"Kanban Made Simple: Demystifying and Applying Toyota's Legendary Manufacturing Process" by John M. Gross and Kenneth R. McInnis

"People used this as a practical guide. It had examples, it came with a disk they could use. They took a part of our business that ran six days a week and started running it five days a week."