

Brought to you by:



"Community Capitalist," April 1, 2010

## How to get your lightsaber moment, with a good business book

By Ron Kitchens  
Chief Executive Officer, Southwest Michigan First

I have to personally admit that I was not a huge fan of the Star Wars trilogy growing up.

No action figure collection is stored in a brown cardboard box in the recesses of my attic.

But I have to admit that I wouldn't necessarily turn down a real lightsaber if I got one as a gift, and I don't mean one of those plastic ones you get in the toy aisle. I mean a real one with a heavy metal hilt that powers up to project a blade of energy plasma that can take out anything and makes that really cool sound as it cuts through the air.

Why? Simply said, I like things that help me do my job better, and I'm sure I could find some task for the lightsaber. Other "helpful" things include my personal board of directors; individuals whom I admire for their particular area of expertise and ability to call my bluff; cutting-edge technology, such as my iPhone, which can get me any bit of information at a nanosecond's notice; and books.

Yes, books.

From the time our parents shared with us those first Grimm's fairy tales, books have been a part of our lives. We entered elementary school and turned the pages of those primers where Dick and Jane taught us how to read.

As we moved on to high school, many of us were forced to carry those heavy chemistry books around as we hoped the periodic tables would absorb directly into our blood stream and translate magically into an "A."

In college, we were assigned reading lists. Those of us who were overachievers actually read every book on the entire list. Those of us who crammed picked one and became an expert on that one book the night before an exam.

Either way, we read because we knew we had to.

At graduation, we received a nice white diploma acknowledging all the reading we had done thus far. And unfortunately, upon reading our name typed neatly after the title of our respective institution of higher learning, reading stopped for many of us.

How many of us since college graduation have ever thought, “If I only knew then what I know now?” I guarantee everyone has.

Unfortunately, that thought usually applies to a life lesson, not a good book, let alone a business book.

Ah, the business book. Yes, that genre of books that doesn’t have stories about knights and hobbits, super detectives like Alex Cross or love stories that withstand the test of time.

Rather, they are those types of books that can actually help us do our jobs better. Books that not only improve our industry knowledge but give us the gifts of foresight, circumspection and caution — all great and absolutely necessary tools for business.

Great leaders and their organizations do not rise to the top by accident. Knowledge is the differentiating factor that keeps them ahead of their competition, and reading is the key.

At the risk of being redundant, I am going to reiterate from my last column a great comment from Mark Twain: “The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can’t read them.”

My organization, Southwest Michigan First, completely agrees. Those who read know the right moves to make in life and business and rise to the top during times of crises through strategic planning and innovation. Our team reads and discusses, as a group, at least 12 books a year.

We have benefitted tremendously from this activity and are now taking it a step further — we are going to share it with you in a new program, First Readers.

In First Readers, Southwest Michigan First throws full support to our region’s commitment of being a talent-driven community with a voracious hunger for knowledge and education. Every two months, we will invite a distinguished author to the area to share his or her book, area of expertise and distinctive personality with us.

In partnership with the Kalamazoo Gazette, Business Review West Michigan, our local libraries and area bookstores, including Kazoo Books, we are going to make sure you know what we are reading and are able to obtain a copy. We encourage you to read and discuss the book with your coworkers, your spouse, your neighbors and your own book clubs.

Then, we invite you to come and listen to the author when he or she arrives in town. Our intention is to become the most well-read and best-educated community in the nation.

Last week, Lori Ann LaRocco, CNBC producer of “Squawk Box” and author of “Thriving in the New Economy: Lessons from Today’s Top Business Minds,” visited Kalamazoo. I was lucky enough to be in attendance, along with a group that included public officials, a local representative from one of our Fortune 500 companies, bankers, company executives and some community members whom I’ve never met or seen before.

People brought their personal copies of the book which they obviously had read because they came prepared with great questions. They left having heard personal accounts from Lori Ann who talks to the likes of Steve Forbes daily.

There was genuine excitement in the room. Excitement at the quality and celebrity of the speaker and excitement that we all now shared something — a common, recently acquired knowledge. We want that excitement to continue.

Check out our First Readers' website. We've included a list of books that our team has recently read, and we'll let you know what those of us who are taking part in First Readers are about to put on our nightstand next.

To give you a head start, we'll next read Jeffrey J. Fox's "How to be a Fierce Competitor."

Hopefully, you'll soon figure out that a book can be as powerful as a lightsaber, even though its pages don't make as cool of a sound as they are turned.

*Ron Kitchens is president and CEO of Southwest Michigan First and an exclusive columnist for Business Review.*