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## The Three Laws of Performance

### Rewriting the Future of Your Organization and Your Life

#### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

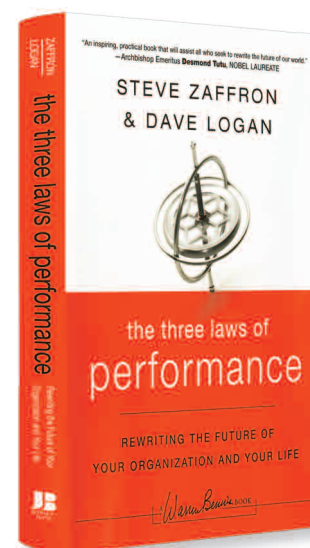
Each of us has a future that has already been written by hopes, fears, dreams, expectations and decisions made about life. In the same way, organizations have futures written by history, circumstances, culture, aspirations, successes and failures. These already-written futures determine and shape the level of performance that's possible for individuals and organizations.

*The Three Laws of Performance* cracks the code on rewriting the future for people and organizations. The result is the transformation of a situation, leading to a dramatic elevation in performance. Rewrite the future, and people's actions naturally shift: from disengaged to proactive, from resigned to inspired, from frustrated to innovative. This kind of transformation creates a wave of momentum: investors want in, companies seek partnerships, and potential employees seek employment.

When the Three Laws described by Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan are applied, performance transforms to a level far beyond what most people think is possible. Rewrite the future and old problems disappear.

#### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to transform impossible situations.
- How to untie the knots of language and free communication.
- What it means to rewrite a future that's already written.
- The role leaders play in elevating performance.
- How to create a Self-led organization.
- How to master the game of performance.



by Steve Zaffron and  
Dave Logan

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE THREE LAWS OF PERFORMANCE

by Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan

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## Part 1: The Three Laws In Action

### The First Law of Performance: How people perform correlates to how situations occur to them.

The First Law answers the question, “Why do people do what they do?” Consider that when *we* do something, it always makes complete sense to *us*. On the other hand, when others do something, we often question, “Why are they doing that? It doesn’t make any sense!”

Although there certainly are facts about how and why things are the way they are, the facts of the matter are much less important to us than the way those facts occur to us. The First Law rejects the common-sense view of actions — that people do what they do in a situation because of a common understanding of the facts.

What gives the First Law the potential to alter performance is its relationship to the other two laws. “The way a situation occurs” to people, and their correlated performance, can be altered through a certain use of language.

When people relate to each other as if each is dealing with the same set of facts, they have fallen into the *reality illusion*. To see the reality illusion at work, think of a person you aren’t happy with at the moment. Think of words that describe that person. You might say, “self-centered” and “irrational.” Notice that you’ve described how the person *occurs* to you. What we see is just the way it is. None of us sees things as they are. We see how things occur to us.

The First Law says that there are two elements: performance and how a situation occurs.

As counterintuitive as it may seem, most change efforts end up *reinforcing* how a situation occurs. Most

companies are resisting a problem by trying to fix it, but the more they push, the more the problem pushes back.

The principle at work here is: *whatever you resist, persists*. If you can see any way that you are resisting your performance challenge, you’ll see that you may be strengthening its hold on you and others — the more you have fought it, the stronger it became.

### The Future Rewritten

There are specific actions you can take to tap into the power of the First Law of Performance. Notice the connection between performance and how situations occur for people. See that this relationship *always* holds.

See the reality illusion at work, in you and people around you. Almost without exception, people don’t notice that all they are aware of is how situations occur to them. They talk and act as if they see things as they really are.

What if you could do something about how situations occur — to you and everyone around you? What impact would this make in everyone’s performance? ●

## Where Is the Key to Performance?

### The Second Law of Performance: How a situation occurs arises in language.

People in a company get tied up in knots of language — knots composed of words, symbols, sentences and communication that somehow block and impede performance. The result is repetitive and unproductive behavior, mostly done with the best of intentions.

How situations occur is inseparable from language. Language is the means through which your future is



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already written. It is also the means through which it can be rewritten.

Consider a performance challenge of your own. Your boss, your finances, your children, your industry, your country — are all resistant to change. But as the First Law of Performance says, your actions correlate with how these occur to you, not to the facts themselves. The key to performance is hiding in a particular facet of language.

### The Knots of Language

Language includes not only spoken and written communication, but also body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, pictures and drawings, music, how people dress, and any other actions that have symbolic intent.

Untying the knots of language begins with seeing that whenever you say something, other communication is carried along with it. We call this phenomenon *the unsaid but communicated*. The unsaid is the most important part of language when it comes to elevating performance. It includes assumptions, expectations, disappointments, resentments, regrets, interpretations, significance, and issues that occur as dangerous. You can feel and experience the unsaid but communicated.

An aspect of communication that writes our future without our even realizing it is the part of language that exists outside the light of our attention, *the unsaid and communicated without awareness*. It determines and shapes which messages are possible, not possible, important, unimportant, and so on. The unawareness aspect puts this part of language outside our control. Until we find leverage on this part of language, the future is written and can't be altered.

### The Key to Performance

For most people, exploring the unsaid is like walking into a cave — the journey goes from bright to dim to pitch black. It starts with someone saying what he or she has been thinking. After a time, the person will say something and feel surprised by what he or she has just said, as if another person uttered the words.

The unsaid, and especially the unsaid that people are unaware of, can leave people with no space to create anything new. The unsaid and communicated without awareness can become linguistic clutter.

The key to performance isn't pushing new conversations about strategy or reorganization into an already crammed space; rather, it's cleaning out the clutter.

Almost universally, it's the unsaid that's cluttered for individuals, groups and organizations. Before anything new can happen, people need to make space by doing

the linguistic equivalent of clearing out closets. This means moving issues into the light of discussion — saying them and examining them in public.

The point is to notice that there are issues constraining people because of what they aren't saying. When people can address and articulate the unsaid, space begins to open up. People can discuss — openly and in public — what's holding them back and what to do about it.

### Our 'Internal Voice'

As we move through the unsaid, there are forms and objects to look for. The first is the inner voice, which is the voice in your head that is constantly talking about everything and anything. Our internal voice runs so constantly that we mostly don't notice it.

Most of the time, the inner voice repeats old thoughts. Only rarely does it say anything new. And yet, it takes up a lot of our awareness. Notice that your inner voice probably won't produce any novel solutions to your performance challenge.

### Rackets

Becoming aware of rackets, and taking responsibility for them, is one of the most important aspects of elevating performance.

A racket has four elements. First, there is a complaint that has persisted for some time. (*A common one in marriages is "He's late again!"*) Second, there is a pattern of behavior that goes along with the complaint. (*The wife may act irritated, aloof and withdrawn.*) The third element is a payoff for having this complaint continue. (*The wife gets to be right, makes her husband wrong, avoids the domination of her husband — or what occurs to her as her husband's domination by being late — and lets her regain control of the situation.*) The fourth element is the cost of this behavior. (*The wife loses closeness with her husband. The wife and husband running their "late again!" rackets are paying a price, about which they are both unaware.*)

Think about your racket. Can you see how the complaint might be a disguise for something deeper, such as a way of controlling a situation, or avoiding the domination of another person?

You'll have more power over a situation when you can label something a racket or can identify that what holds you back has something to do with how a situation occurs to you.

### Using the Second Law

When we see the power of the unsaid, two compelling insights become clear. The first is that the situation is absurd. How the situation occurs to us is given by lan-

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guage, yet it occurs to people to be as real as a wall.

The second insight leads to action: clear out the unsaid. Do this by saying what is unsaid and dealing with it. Getting the payoff and costs out into the open helps people discard some of the old conversations and make room for new conversations.

People often look for performance gains in the wrong place: in trying to force conversations before making space for them. The way to make space is to leverage the fact that how situations occur arises in language — and, in fact, the key to performance lies in language. ●

### Rewriting a Future That's Already Written

**The Third Law of Performance: Future-based language transforms how situations occur to people.**

The Third Law rests on a fundamental distinction: there are two different ways to use language. The first is descriptive — using language to depict or represent things as they are or have been.

Future-based language, also called *generative language*, has the power to create new futures, to craft vision and to eliminate the blinders that are preventing people from seeing possibilities. It doesn't describe how a situation occurs; it *transforms* how it occurs. It does this by rewriting the future.

#### The Power of Future-Based Language

Future-based language projects a new future that replaces what people see coming. It doesn't modify the default future; it replaces it.

Future-based language is responsible for historical moments becoming turning points. When Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I have a dream," he created that dream in others — and displaced the default future of racial segregation.

Let's turn to your performance challenge. Think back on how the situation occurs to you. Notice that, even without trying, you think of past events. Your inner voice describes them and, based on what happened, predicts whether they will happen again or not.

Does your default future have any space in it to create something new, or is it all filled up?

What if, right now, you could substitute that future with another? Not one based on what's happened before, but something new? What if the future you see coming was to alter in its substance, going from default to invented?

### Declaration: The Kind of Language That Creates a Future

All generative language relies on speech acts — an action taken through language. The most fundamental of speech acts is a declaration, which brings a possible future into existence. A declared future is not a dream or hope, but a future to which you commit yourself. Just as a default future isn't certain, a created future isn't a done deal, either. What we invent is a possibility to which we commit our entire being.

#### The Condition Required for Future-Based Language

How do you empty out the future that you are currently living into?

There are three dimensions to this process of "blanking the canvas," and people often move back and forth among them until they feel they have the room to invent something new.

The first dimension is *seeing that what binds and constrains us isn't the facts, it's language* — and, in particular, *descriptive language*. Issues that lurk in the unsaid occur as facts. When we become aware of these issues and are able to address and articulate them, what had occurred to us as facts shifts to being interpretations.

The second dimension is articulating the default future and asking, "Do we really want this as our future?" Until you can articulate the future and see that it isn't inevitable and necessary but is a construction of language, it's impossible to make a choice. Instead, we feel constrained and attempt to fight our way out.

The third dimension to creating a blank space is the most powerful: *completing issues from the past*. To complete means moving an incident from the default future to the past. This process goes far beyond "getting closure" or "starting the healing process." If you complete an incident, it no longer lives in your future.

Think about your performance challenge. Is there anyone involved in the situation with which you feel distance? Perhaps any sense that something is off? What you're seeing are incompletions — something that lives in your future, some baggage from the past. An incompleteness lives in the occurring, not in the facts.

Creating a new future requires a constant commitment to being complete with everyone involved. Doing so creates and sustains a blank space into which the new future can be created.

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## Principles for Generating New Futures

### *Principle 1: Futures Inspire Action*

Creating a new future with a large group of people takes a radically different path; more important, it starts with a different intention: to displace nonproductive conversations with conversations that establish a future so vibrant that people are eager to bring it about. That future creates a sense of urgency, and people's actions correlate to it.

### *Principle 2: Futures Speak to Everyone in the Process*

In 2001, Northrop Grumman's strategists recognized that, in order to keep growing, the company needed to expand into markets other than defense. Space exploration became the obvious opportunity. After four days of work with 70 people, using the Three Laws of Performance, "we defined our role within the company and the new marketplace," says Doug Young, a Northrop Grumman vice president.

What made this effort successful is that people felt that the new future satisfied their concerns.

### *Principle 3: Futures Exist in the Moment of Speaking*

Future-based language doesn't describe anything in the current reality. Rather, it creates a possible future to which the speaker is giving his or her word in the moment of speaking.

Take a moment and speculate about a future for yourself and others that would:

- Inspire action for everyone involved
- Fulfill the concerns of everyone involved
- Be vibrant and compelling in the moment you say it. ●

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## Part II: Rewriting the Future of Leadership

Each of the Three Laws of Performance has a leadership corollary — a corollary that guides what leaders do and, more important, shapes who they are for others.

**Leadership Corollary 1: Leaders have a say, and give others a say, in how situations occur.**

Leaders who empower others to rewrite and realize futures can transform any situation, no matter how impossible it may seem.

**Leadership Corollary 2: Leaders master the conversational environment.**

Leaders manage, and master, the conversational environment by working with people to resolve any incompletions they have. Leaders also work with other people

to bring group rackets into the open so they can be discussed and resolved.

**Leadership Corollary 3: Leaders listen for the future of their organization.**

Leaders create conversations from the Third Law, composed of future-based language, to invent futures for the organization that didn't previously exist. However, leaders don't rewrite the future by themselves — they create the space and provide the "listening" for that future. When the future coalesces, leaders have a way of knowing it.

A leader who taps into the Three Laws listens for a future that will transform everything in the present. A leader listens for a future that is not predictable, probable, linear, and was not going to happen anyway, and which compels inspired action. ●

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## The Self-Led Organization

Although the last few decades have seen corporate responsibility increase, the fundamental nature of organizations hasn't transformed.

What would an evolution of corporations look like? What could the corporations of the late 21st century look like? How can we build them today, and use them to release us from crises we seem to be facing?

Our purpose is to make an organization Self-led, with the Self arising from all those people participating in the organization's network of conversations. The result is an organization that has it all: skyrocketing profits, dedicated and engaged employees, satisfied local communities, and sustainability.

Although a process as complex as finding an organization's Self can't be reduced to steps, there is a critical flow.

**Encourage Leaders to Step Forward.** The first part of stepping up begins with standing for the possibility that your organization can go beyond its current views of success to a place that integrates the profit motive with the desire to be global citizens.

**Manage the Environment of the Network of Conversations.** For the organizational Self to emerge, people have to take responsibility for the whole of the organization and for the concerns of stakeholders.

**Create Ongoing Conversations with Stakeholders.** Organizations that initiate and engage in ongoing conversations with their external stakeholders will be among the first to build authentic relationships with the groups and communities that they affect.

**Listen for a Future That Encompasses the Self.** An organizational Self emerges when the right seeds

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have been planted. The conversational environment has to be tended to and implanted with integrity and ownership. The concerns of stakeholders must be an active set of conversations. People have to confront the truth about the default future of the organization and be willing to set it down and let it go. As the Self emerges, people begin to notice that they all have the same vision in mind.

**Don't Lose Your Self.** Once the Self of an organization is clear, leaders step forward and use future-based language to make declarations. Managers come forward to build systems, processes, policies and procedures to turn these declarations into reality.

**Establish Self-Led Management.** Finding an organization's Self is a business imperative. A company that listens and responds to all of its stakeholders can construct a business model to form long-term partnerships throughout the global workplace. ●

### Part III: Mastering the Game of Performance

#### Who or What Is Leading Your Life?

In all of our lives there are moments when we make critical decisions about ourselves that give us an overriding sense of who we are, not just in the present moment, but from then on. Based on the special self-defining nature of these decisions, we see ourselves in a way that limits who we are and what we can do.

The decisions we make that deal with what's wrong about us form the basis of our persona — who we consider ourselves to be.

These kinds of decisions are life altering. It's as if you are at a trial, and the trial is about how well you are dealing with life. You are playing three roles at the same time: the accused, the jury and the judge. That you are going to find yourself guilty is almost preordained. The sentence is the decision you make about how to deal with the future in a way that makes up for what is lacking in who you are. This is a lifelong sentence with no reprieve. These life sentences limit and narrow how you occur to yourself, and even how life occurs to you.

#### Overturing the Life Sentence

The good news about the life sentence is that you aren't just the accused, the judge and the jury. You can also be the court of appeals. You can reverse the conviction and release yourself from the prison of limitations. The bad news is that there is serious work to be done.

First, you have to tell the truth about your life sen-

### The New Organization: Built from the Self Up

Most organizations comprise networks of conversations that are inconsistent, dissonant and cluttered. However, if an organization's network of conversations could be infused with integrity, and harmonized, it could find its Self and become Self-led.

For an organization to deal with the pressure cooker it is in, it needs to rewrite its future by altering its network of conversations. It needs to create a compelling future for its stakeholders and align its network of conversations to fulfill that future. In the process, the organization's Self emerges, which is the collective essence of all of the people involved in its operations, including a future that inspires them and fulfills their concerns. This is what is meant by a Self-led organization.

tence and what it is designed to hide. This step requires re-examining the evidence you used against yourself at trial. Only when the complete case is presented to the court of appeals can it be thrown out.

Once the life sentence is revealed for what it is — a decision about how to be in the future — you have a choice. Given that any decision is itself an action requiring language, you can renew or revoke it. But until you see the situation for what it is, you don't have a choice to say anything else about who you are.

Only when you see that it was you who made these decisions and judgments about and on yourself can you then overturn the life sentence. If you believe another person did it to you, or the circumstances did it to you, then you have no power. But if you are the imposer of the judgment, then you can revoke it.

#### Creating a Crisis of Authenticity

The idea of intentionally creating a crisis is counterintuitive. But if you want to transform who you are — how you occur to yourself — then you need to create a crisis of identity, one in which the only way out is transformation.

How do we create this kind of crisis that moves us into transforming ourselves? We do it by focusing on the areas of our lives in which we are inauthentic, those times when we are pretending.

The way out of the trap is to create a crisis over *being in the trap*. Tolerating any loss of freedom, power, contentment or self-expression becomes unacceptable.

To experience the kind of transformation that over-

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turns your already-written future and writes it anew, you will have to give something up. Examples are giving up safety and risk avoidance, letting go of always having a way out, giving up the fear of having nothing to say or giving up the fear of saying something stupid.

When we alter how we occur to ourselves, everything around us shifts. Our business associates, our families, even life, show up in a new way. With that new foundation, anything is possible — even a new future. ●

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### The Path to Mastery

#### Milestone 1: Seeing Your “Terministic Screen” in Action

A person’s way of seeing a situation is filtered through what scholar Kenneth Burke calls a “terministic screen.” This screen itself is made up of language — words, terms, phrases and their relation to each other. This screen directs our attention to aspects of reality. We don’t see the world, and we don’t see the terministic screen; instead, we see what the screen allows us to see.

The path to mastering the Three Laws is to build a new terministic screen around new core distinctions. The process of learning something new can be seen to involve fitting what is new with what we knew before as a way of understanding. When you realize that you want to get the full impact of new ideas, it’s time to build a new terministic screen.

This realization is the first milestone. Its point is that we allow a new screen to be built by rejecting the need to fit new terms into our already existing screen. We catch ourselves reshaping a new idea to fit what we already know, or rejecting a new idea as being inconsistent with our screen. There’s nothing wrong with doing so — it’s what happens until we get to the second milestone.

#### Milestone 2: Building a New Terministic Screen

To see the need to build a new terministic screen, consider how the earth appeared to people for millennia: at the center of the universe, with the sun, moon and stars moving around it. The terministic screen on this subject was consistent and compelling. Galileo argued for a radical new idea that didn’t fit into the terministic screen of the day — that it was the earth that did the moving. People responded violently to this theory, which to them clearly was wrong.

So why is it so easy for us today to “see” ourselves

moving around the sun, seeing the universe that Galileo saw? Because we learned a terministic screen with these ideas at the center. Because of our screen, we have no problem imagining asteroids, other worlds, space flight and life on Mars. All these thoughts would be impossible for someone with the old terministic screen.

#### Milestone 3: You’ll See New Opportunities for Elevated Performance Everywhere

Shortly after you pass the second milestone, you’ll notice that you are seeing old situations with a new perspective.

You’ll become aware that most people talk about the future in terms of the past. You’ll notice their default future, often unarticulated, and how their actions correlate with it.

A great side benefit of taking the path to mastering the Three Laws is developing leadership, and even charisma. You’ll find yourself standing for a future rather than trying to figure one out.

As you declare the future — incorporating the concerns of others — people become engaged, excited and inspired. Workplaces transform. Performance elevates. The default future is rewritten.

You will notice that where there used to be a lot of confusion and anxiety about what to do, there now is a clarity and focus for what needs to be created. It’s as if the frenzy concerning what could go wrong is replaced with an excitement of what can be created.

This third milestone of seeing opportunities for elevated performance everywhere is correlated to realizing that you are no longer remembering the Three Laws. They are now a part of your terministic screen.

#### Milestone 4: Teaching Others

The fourth milestone, making the application of the Three Laws a community effort, is itself a means of access to ever-expanding mastery. Through engaging, teaching and coaching others in thinking from the Three Laws, performance will expand while you discover new and creative applications of the Three Laws. When you take this step, elevating performance has moved from being your personal interest to being the group’s interest. At this point, you are onto the opportunity to rewrite the future of an organization — perhaps even to discover an organization’s Self and make that the driver of a new era in your company. ●

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## Breaking the Performance Barrier

The only thing that matters is performance, and performance comes down to the actions of people. Here are seven specific commitments that, when made with integrity, reliably break the performance barrier. Let them guide you in the conversations that you have.

### Commitment 1: Get Out of the Stands

In the stands at a football game, people are talking *about* the game. There is little at stake, little at risk and their conversations have virtually no impact on the action of the game.

And then there are the conversations the players are having on the field. These conversations not only affect the game, they *are* the game. Throughout the game, people are communicating in such a way that the team is focused on winning.

You leave the stands when you stop assessing and judging and, instead, put something at risk. Make yourself accountable for winning the game.

### Commitment 2: Create a New Game

You make a new game when you declare that something is important. This is what you're putting at stake, and it is what you're holding yourself accountable to. When others commit to the game with you, they join you on the field.

So use future-based language and declare what's important.

### Commitment 3: Make the Obstacles Conditions of the Game

If something occurs to you and others as an obstacle, you'll push back by playing on the obstacle's terms. Instead, make the obstacles conditions of the game.

### Commitment 4: Share Your Insights

Breakthrough performance becomes possible when you engage others in the insights from the Three Laws by sharing them.

When you share, other people take on performance challenges with you and form a network. In this community, everyone is learning and working together to achieve what once looked impossible.

### Commitment 5: Find the Right Coaching

The coach isn't in the stands, and he or she doesn't play the game, either. Still, the coach risks as much as anyone who takes to the field.

Great coaching alters how the situation of the game occurs for the players, especially at critical moments. As

you create a network that takes on breakthrough performance challenges, you will find yourself coaching.

### Commitment 6: File Your Past in Your Past

We need to get the future and the past straightened out, once and for all.

Imagine two filing cabinets, labeled "The Past" and "The Future." From time to time stressful, difficult or dangerous things happen. When they do, and we survive, we note what worked and keep it on file in case that situation happens again. You put it in The Future cabinet.

After you've lived through enough of those incidents, the filing cabinet of The Future is full. You may find that you're repeating the past, and you are. You do the same things over and over because you've put those files in your future.

If we emptied everything out from The Future filing cabinet — all the decisions we placed there to deal with what may happen — what would be left in that filing cabinet? Nothing. That's the nature of the real future: there's nothing there. You can only create into nothing. You can create a future into nothingness.

You have to look into nothingness and declare what can be and what you actually commit to. If you stay in this conversation, you'll never confuse the future and the past again.

### Commitment 7: Play the Game as If Your Life Depended on It

Begin the coaching by starting with yourself. Overturn your life sentence. Create a powerful future to live into.

There are no circumstances in business or in life that you can't handle from the Three Laws. No matter what hurdles you have to jump, challenges you have to face or unfamiliar territory you have to cross, you're ready for it.

Play the game passionately, intensely and fearlessly. But don't make it significant. It's just a game. ●

#### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Three Laws of Performance*, you'll also like:

1. ***The Accountable Leader* by Brian Dive.** Centered around three themes — leadership, accountability and organizational structure — this book explores what it means for managers to be held accountable at all levels.
2. ***Primal Leadership* by Daniel Goleman, Annie McKee and Richard E. Boyatzis.** Discover how good leaders use their Emotional Intelligence (EI) to get results. Learn how the four quadrants of EI impact your style of leading.
3. ***Leaders at All Levels* by Ram Charan.** Ram Charan takes aim at the current crisis in leadership: the shortage of leaders prepared to face today's complex business challenges. Charan offers a solution that outlines a new model for succession and leadership development.