



Elevate

The Three Disciplines of Advanced Strategic Thinking

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Understanding the basic principles of strategy is just the prerequisite for becoming a truly strategic leader. In *Elevate*, Rich Horwath focuses on advanced strategic thinking that will drive results in the short- and long-term. His three-discipline approach breaks strategy down into its fundamentals: Coalesce, Compete and Champion.

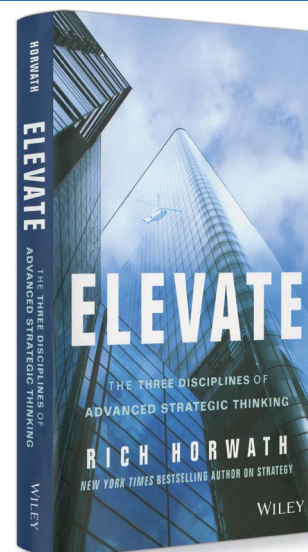
Effective strategic leadership starts with a bird's-eye perspective, but it doesn't end there. Incorporating new insights and influencing commitment are part and parcel of advanced strategy. Through research, exercises, thought models and lucid explanations of key concepts, *Elevate* guides leaders in the process of building these essential skills.

Too often, managers are so busy with day-to-day business operations and fire drills that they forget to take a step back — to *elevate* their thinking. Horwath demonstrates that more advanced strategic thinking among managers would lead to greater strategic innovation and fewer fire drills, freeing leadership to take the initiative necessary to drive the organization to the next level.

Leaders who are unable to think strategically could find themselves being phased out. *Elevate* helps leaders get ahead in their careers by stepping back to focus on the big picture.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- What strategic thinking really means.
- How executives can practice strategic thinking daily to guide their businesses.
- How to use a concrete framework to keep your career vital through innovation and inspiration.



by Rich Horwath

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: ELEVATE

by Rich Horwath

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Introduction

To elevate means to lift up or to raise to a higher rank or intellectual level. One of the biggest challenges I continually hear from CEOs and talent management leaders is, “We need to elevate our manager’s thinking.” In essence, they’re saying that managers need to be able to quickly elevate their thinking from down in the tactical weeds of day-to-day operations to a higher level. At this higher level, they can expand their perspective to understand how the core foundational elements of their business fit together and provide superior value to customers.

The inability to elevate thinking in order to set strategic direction can have devastating long-term effects on an organization. To enable managers to elevate their thinking to a level that allows them to see the foundational elements of the business from a higher, more holistic vantage point, I’ve developed a framework called *the three disciplines of advanced strategic thinking*:

1. **Coalesce:** Fusing together insights to create an innovative business model
2. **Compete:** Creating a system of strategy to achieve competitive advantage
3. **Champion:** Leading others to think and act strategically to execute strategy

The three disciplines of advanced strategic thinking provide leaders with new concepts to change mindsets and practical tools to enhance behaviors so that they are maximizing their strategic leadership potential. The fact that the framework elements are referred to as “disciplines” means that it takes time, effort and commitment to master them.

In our action-oriented world, where we’re electronically tethered to one another, investing time to think on a regular basis can be a challenge in itself. While it’s easy to be pulled into one more meeting that you really don’t need to be in and check email for the 47th time today while meeting with others, this lack of discipline is going to chain you to mediocrity.

The adrenaline rush that comes from scrambling to fight another urgent but unimportant fire is addicting and much more exciting than spending 30 quiet minutes thinking about the business. But it’s these types of decisions that create your patterns of thinking and behavior. It’s the discipline, or lack of discipline, that can make or break your career and determine the success or failure of your business. ●

Discipline #1: Coalesce

Strategic thinking is the ability to generate insights that lead to competitive advantage. Using the lens of *new value* on the ideas, projects, initiatives and tactics proposed each day provides a powerful filter for eliminating meaningless activities. It forces you to more closely examine *why* things are being proposed and pursued instead of just *what* is to be done.

Advanced strategic thinking requires not only the insights generated but the ability to coalesce these insights into meaningful differentiated value. Coalesce means to bring together, and we see this skill evident in great strategies and the strategists who have devised them.

Patterns in Strategy

The patterns of decisions your managers make regarding their strategic direction will ideally lead to the



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achievement of their goals and objectives. As strategy involves the intelligent allocation of limited resources, it's imperative that positive patterns emerge in how those resources are allocated and, just as important, reallocated.

For many managers, resources stuck in dead-end projects and unproductive tactics simply stay there until the next planning process rolls around. The strategic thinking trap of the sunk-cost effect — continuing to invest in a losing endeavor because resources have already been spent on it — can put an anvil around the effort to elevate thinking. The results can be damaging not only for companies but also for their individual leaders.

One clear indication of a lack of strategy is a random and patternless hodgepodge of decisions with no consistency in approach. Leaders who describe their strategic approach as *opportunistic* believe that every opportunity is considered a good one. These opportunistic leaders fail to create a disciplined pattern of focus on providing maximum value to the right type of customer.

Inherent to identifying patterns in the marketplace and within the customer and competitor arenas is the ability to understand the business context. One method of pattern detection is to examine snapshots of the business at different points in time to identify combinations of activities or tendencies. To do so, a series of Contextual Radars can be created on a periodic basis and then examined for patterns.

Contextual Radar provides a visual snapshot of the four primary components of business market, customers, competitors and the company. At the center of the radar are any issues or activities that are at the core of changes in the business. It's the recording and review of events within the Contextual Radar framework over time that can then be mined for patterns. Once the patterns are detected and described, thoughtful conversation around their meaning, impact and warrant of resource allocation can occur.

Systems

A strategist's ability to see the big picture involves not only the elements of the picture but also how those elements are connected and what functions they serve. When these elements have connections and a purpose, we can refer to their whole as a system. As the first core skill of the advanced strategic thinker is to coalesce, or bring together, it's fitting that the concept of a system helps us do just that.

One of the ways we know a soccer team is a system, for example, is because if we take away elements, connections or purpose, the system is fundamentally changed. Remove the players or ball (elements), rules (connections) or score

(purpose), and you no longer have a soccer game. As rules of thumb, if you cannot identify the elements, connections or the effects they have upon each other, then they most likely do not form a system.

As a system develops, it generates patterns of behavior due to the connections between elements in an organized fashion. That's one of the reasons it's important to look at your business strategy as a system, involving your employees, customers, suppliers, competitors and shareholders. Changes in any one of these elements or their connection (relationship) to others can fundamentally alter the course of your business. Understanding the systems that comprise your business is an important part of developing long-term strategy.

Business Model

At the foundation of a company is the business model. A business model is a structural description of how the organization creates, delivers and captures value.

The three phases of a business model can be described as follows:

Phase I: Value Creation

- Core competency: Primary area of expertise (what you know)
- Capabilities: Activities performed with key resources (what you do)
- Value proposition: Rationale for the offering (customer, need met/job done, approach to satisfy need, benefit to customer)

Phase II: Value Delivery

- Value chain: Configuration of capabilities to provide value (how you do it)
- Channels: Customer access points for offerings (where you offer it)

Phase III: Value Capture

- Price: Amount customers pay for the offering
- Revenue: Price multiplied by volume sold
- Cost: Expenditure of resources to provide offering
- Profit: Revenues minus costs

Profitable Growth

The point of coalescing insights into strategic direction is to generate profitable growth. Building pipelines of continuous, profitable growth is the lifeblood of any business. Therefore, it's important to understand the potential levers for growth as well as the pitfalls that can stall it.

A research study found that 87 percent of stall points, a term for the start of a prolonged financial decline, are caused by factors that are within management's control.

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A staggering 70 percent of these stall factors result from choices about strategy.

To spur your thinking on organic growth, it's helpful to have an understanding of the range of potential pathways to increase profits. A tool to help leaders explore their growth options is the Strategy Spectrum. The Strategy Spectrum graphically lays out six columns of levers for creating new value for customers that can stimulate profitable growth.

1. **What:** Offerings (products/services)
2. **Who:** Potential target customers
3. **Why:** Customer need or job fulfilled
4. **Where:** Channels to access offerings
5. **When:** Time of access to offerings
6. **How:** Activities

Beginning with the current business model, items are placed in the columns representing the business as it operates today. Then new items borrowed from other companies and industries are used to complete the columns. The key is to play with combinations from the various columns to generate new ways to profitably grow the business.

Strategy and Innovation

Strategy and innovation are often shown to be two primary contributors to sustained financial excellence and competitive advantage. The common denominator for both strategy and innovation is insight. An insight is described as the joining together of two or more pieces of information or data in a unique way to come up with a new approach, new product, new service or new solution that delivers value. Insights come from the ability to wade through the waves of input we receive each day and mentally connect the dots in new and creative ways.

Business strategy is defined as the intelligent allocation of limited resources through a unique system of activity to outperform the competition in serving customers. The only way to truly intelligently allocate resources is to have strong insight into how your product or service provides value to customers in ways that are different than competitive offerings.

Innovation is the continual hunt for new value; strategy is ensuring that we configure our resources in the best way possible to deliver that value. When a leader embarks on innovation efforts, there are four potential outcomes:

- **Differentiation:** providing a distinct offering that leads to new profits.
- **Neutralization:** eliminating a gap in offerings or performance relative to the competition and market standards.

- **Productivity:** increasing efficiency or efficacy of processes in order to reduce costs.
- **Waste:** efforts that don't result in the first three outcomes and miss the mark of providing new value at an acceptable cost. ●

Discipline #2: Compete

To compete means to strive toward a goal. In attempting to reach the goal, we strive with others seeking that same goal, which supplies the motivational catalyst for us to try harder.

Research shows that in the arts, athletics and academics, the act of competing helps most people perform at a higher level. This motivational aspect of competition is even stronger when people know that they are just slightly behind those they are competing with.

Winning in any endeavor is often a result of competing to one's maximum potential.

A leader is a company, product or service that has market leadership and is in the position of protecting the business they have while looking for new, profitable growth. A challenger actively seeks ways to increase brand awareness and expand business. A spectator is a "me-too" type that operates in either a constantly reactive or mind-numbingly passive way. The goals and strategies you set can be conditional, depending on which of these positions you find yourself in.

Leader

When a new challenger enters the leader's market, there exists the temptation to immediately react with a flurry of tactics or completely ignore the new player altogether. But before either of these approaches should even be considered, a thoughtful assessment of the new entrant will provide a range of available options to strategically manage the situation. The following are the top 10 questions to catalyze your thought process and initiate a productive conversation around the topic of the new challenger:

1. Does the challenger's offering provide different benefits from our offering?
2. Do the challenger's unique benefits include functionality, quality, reliability, convenience and/or cost?
3. Does the challenger enter the market with a different business model?
4. Does the challenger's business model differ from ours in how they create, deliver or capture value?
5. What is the challenger's value proposition?
6. What is the challenger's core competency?

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7. What are the challenger's top three capabilities?
8. Does the challenger's offering target the same customer segments as our offering?
9. Is the challenger capable of taking away our current customers?
10. Should we respond to the challenger at this time or just monitor their activity?

Challenger

A challenger may be a new entrant into the market or one that has maintained a secondary or tertiary position for various reasons. One of the reasons failure rates for newly launched products are as high as 50 percent is that the challenger sees the market from a product perspective instead of through a customer-need lens.

When you find yourself in the role of challenger in a market, consider the following 11 questions to stimulate your thought process and initiate a productive conversation around how to topple the leader:

1. What customer needs or jobs are not currently being fulfilled?
2. Which customer segments are underserved by the leader?
3. Does the leader's offering provide different benefits from our offering?
4. Do the leader's unique benefits include functionality, quality, reliability, convenience and/or cost?
5. How does the leader's business model differ from ours?
6. What is the leader's value proposition?
7. What is the leader's core competency?
8. What are the leader's top three capabilities?
9. Are we capable of taking away customers from the leader?
10. Are we capable of transforming non-users into customers?
11. In what part of the value chain can we establish a foothold of success in this market?

A challenger mindset demands the discipline to make real trade-offs and focus one's resources with laser-like precision in only one or two areas that allow them to provide the greatest differentiated value to their targeted customers. It means not whining about a lack of resources and realizing you can't do a little bit of everything in order to play it safe. It means embracing risk and breaking with industry convention to do something that truly stands out.

Spectator

Many products and services continue to receive time and budget each year without providing much value to

customers or profit to the company. These spectators either mindlessly react to the competition's moves, or they sit passively by and watch competitors continue to grow at their expense.

If you find your product or service in a spectator role, it's time to honestly answer the following five questions:

1. Why are we in this category?
2. Is this offering contributing profits to the business?
3. How can we redesign or reposition the offering so that it brings unique value to key customers, resulting in greater profit?
4. Would the customers we value most miss this offering if we discontinued it?
5. Could we bring more value to the market if we discontinued this offering and focused our resources on more profitable offerings?

Taking into account your position in the market when developing strategy means it's conditional. Not taking into account your position in the market when developing strategy means you're ripe for getting beat.

Competitive Advantage

While it's been debated how long a company can sustain competitive advantage in a market, the aim of most firms is to deliver superior value to their customers in a profitable way. Research shows that the primary means to profitably deliver superior value is through differentiation.

Creating, developing or discovering real differentiation that fuels that delivery of superior value takes time, thought and the courage to make trade-offs with one's resources. True differentiated value isn't determined by you. It is determined by your customer, and it shows up in the form of your profits.

Competitive advantage can be defined, then, as the ability to deliver superior value based on differentiation rooted in capabilities. Capabilities are comprised of resources and activities that are competitively relevant. Capabilities are what you do (activities) with what you have (resources). Competitive advantage isn't defined as having the best product or a better service, because in the end, best and better are subjective, depending on the customer and the type of value they seek.

Indirect & Intangible Competition

When we think competition, we think rivals. However, the true intent of business competition is not to beat the opponent. The real goal is to earn greater profits for the company. The battle for these profits is fought on multiple fronts, only one of which is with direct rivals. The indirect competitors for profits include customers, suppliers, potential entrants and producers of substitutes.

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While direct rivals consume most of the mind share of leaders, it's the indirect competitors that can quietly eat away at your profits and position in the industry value chain.

In addition to direct and indirect competitors, there is also the effect of intangible competition on a company's profits. Intangible competition by its very nature involves factors that you can't see or touch. Intangible competition includes affinity for the status quo, apathy and priorities.

Status quo. An affinity for the status quo is a human condition where people tend to favor the way things are versus potential change. Internally, the affinity for the status quo manifests itself during the strategic thinking planning process as managers continue to allocate their resources in virtually the same way year after year.

A customer's affinity for the status quo is a formidable competitor. When you introduce a new product or service, in most cases you're asking customers to make changes in their thinking and behavior. Then you're hoping they sustain those changes over time.

Apathy. Apathy is described as a lack of interest or excitement in something that others may be passionate about. Apathy is indifference to the product, service, event, person or situation at hand.

Priorities. Internally, priorities can prove to be an intangible competitor because different groups are often tasked with different goals. The external challenge with competing priorities can be seen when companies are not truly driven by fulfilling customers' unmet needs. Instead, they work off their own internal agenda and hope it somehow meshes with the customers' agenda so they can be considered strategic partners. Unless an organization has taken the time to observe customers, identified their key jobs to be done, and produced solutions that deliver differentiated value on those unmet needs, the term strategic partner is a farce.

Your ability to assess, understand and outperform the various types of competition will influence your organization's trajectory. Competition involves striving together, reaching for higher levels of performance. Higher levels of performance are directly related to your insights for providing customers with differentiated value. ●

Discipline #3: Champion

To effectively champion a group's strategic direction could very well mean the difference between success or bankruptcy and employment or unemployment for thousands of people. Developing a strong strategy means that

you've made trade-offs, and trade-offs mean that some of your potential customers aren't going to be happy.

While we know good strategy is not going to please all potential external customers, what's often overlooked is that good strategy is also going to upset some of your internal customers as well. Moving resources (time, people and budget) from one area to another is sure to stir up emotions as some people will see the changes as hurting their ability to run their part of the business. Therefore, any good strategy will come under attack internally because of the changes it causes.

And when the strategy comes under attack, you'll need to defend or champion it. In championing the strategy, a disciplined approach to managing time, influencing others, and continually developing new skills will be critical to success.

Using Time Strategically

As leaders move to higher levels in an organization, it's natural for them to continue applying their expertise to a wide variety of operational and tactical issues that arise, even if those issues are no longer within their realm of responsibility. While performing these unnecessary types of tasks is a natural inclination, it also does them a disservice in the long run. Their inability to let go of past tasks results in not cultivating new skills that will be instrumental to the firm's future success, and it hinders the development of other managers who should be fulfilling these responsibilities.

Leaders who are unable to delegate often rely more heavily on multitasking. While working on several things at once may provide a feeling of overachievement, it's in fact a smokescreen for lower productivity.

Leaders lacking a disciplined approach to applying their expertise and time can also become meeting magnets, where they are pulled into far more meetings than they actually should attend. If you're constantly being pulled into meetings without firm decision-making intent or an agenda not aligned with key priorities, you're wasting precious time. As management guru Peter Drucker noted, "Time is the scarcest resource, and unless it is managed, nothing else can be managed."

To more effectively utilize time in your leadership role, consider the following three ideas.

1. Dedicate chunks of time to a single task.
2. Send fewer emails.
3. Make time trade-offs.

People want more time. What most people really need is more direction and greater discipline in how to use the time they already have.

Influencing Strategy Commitment

Influence is defined as “the power to change or affect someone or something; the power to cause changes without directly forcing them to happen; a person or thing that affects someone or something in an important way.”

In the matrix organizational structure employed in many companies, the ability to influence is crucial if one is to gain their share of internal resources and effectively align their priorities with those of other key players.

During the strategic thinking phase of the strategy development process, people from different functional areas and different levels in the organization should have the opportunity to contribute insights. Having representatives from these different areas share input sends a powerful message to the organization that there is real importance in their work and ideas. It's equally important to share with everyone *why* the strategy being pursued has been chosen. People don't have to agree with the strategy or the rationale behind the why. The important thing is they want to know what the strategy is and why. In essence, they need the *because*, as in “We're doing X, because Y.”

Increasing Buy-In with Social Proof

In addition to providing people with the reason or *why* behind the strategy, you can also gain a greater level of commitment to the strategy using social proof. The principle of social proof explains that someone is more likely to behave in a way that is similar to how they see others behave.

When it comes to strategy, social proof can be a powerful influence. When employees see their leader fully engaged and committed to a strategy, it demonstrates to them that it isn't another flavor-of-the-month initiative. A leader's words can move people to action, but a leader's actions can move people to commitment.

One of the challenges leaders face in getting their people to commit to a strategy is in the nature of strategy itself. New strategies are instantly working against a tide of doubt, not to mention people's reluctance to change. Therefore, another application of the principle of social proof is to provide people with evidence that the chosen strategy provides the best course of action.

As you hone your strategy and communicate it with others in the organization, it's important to bring it to a personal level. One of the reasons strategic planning has become a mind-numbingly ambiguous exercise is because it's not translated to the individual level. The lesson for leaders: Tailor the meaning of the strategy to your audience and how it relates specifically to them and what they're doing on a daily basis.

Strategic Behavior

The ability to influence others to commit to goals and strategies over the long-term doesn't come from a one-time motivational speech or a colorful banner. The success of influence is determined by one's ability to shape others' behaviors. A behavior is defined in its simplest form as an observable activity.

Whether it's at home, school or work, behavioral direction needs to be specific, concrete and observable. When developing new behaviors for a group to effectively create and implement strategies, remember the power of games. A game typically involves goals, rules, challenges and interaction. Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a leader in the field of positive psychology, showed that activities involving game criteria such as goals, rules and clear feedback can create *flow*: the state in which people become so engrossed with an activity that it creates an optimal state of inner experience.

As you design new behaviors to implement strategies, attempt to include built-in opportunities to loop in goals, guidelines, challenges and frequent feedback. The important thing to understand is that the behaviors you develop should contain the game and flow criteria to build a greater sense of inner fulfillment and drive within your team members. A strategic leader understands that their role is not only to stimulate this new thinking for their group, it's also to ensure it's accompanied by the appropriate behaviors to generate new growth. We can capture this notion in an advanced premise: **New thinking inspires new behavior, leading to new results.**

Practicing Strategic Thinking

Once you've identified the behaviors that will have the most impact on the success of your business, it's important to give your people an opportunity to practice them on a regular basis.

In order to effectively develop a new behavior, it's helpful to break the behavior down into its component pieces, practice those pieces individually, and then practice those pieces together. When practicing the individual pieces, it's more effective to do so slowly, allowing for mistakes and then correcting those mistakes as you go.

A skill deteriorates if the primary circuits comprising the activities in a particular behavior are not used for 30 days. If you're not dedicating time at least monthly to questions and frameworks to think strategically about the business, then you will not be strategic.

Leaders have the opportunity to practice key behaviors and hone and develop their people's skills during their daily interactions. Opportunities for shaping how your

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managers practice include one-to-one conversations, customer visits and staff meetings. Monthly strategy dialogues and workshops can be highly formative experiences that raise everyone's performance. As these situations arise, there are three practice principles that can guide your instruction.

Practice Principle #1: Begin with the Goal. Each practice needs to have at least one goal to work toward. Once the goals have been identified prior to the practice, the activities that build toward the goals can be chosen.

Practice Principle #2: Break the Whole into Pieces. Once a manager has a goal to practice, the next step is to break that behavior into its individual pieces. Mastery is then demonstrated when the manager can seamlessly weave together the individual elements of the behavior into its whole.

Practice Principle #3: Correct with a Solution. The correction provides specific, concrete direction on how to improve and then gives the person a chance to enact the feedback immediately.

Strategy Conversations

Strategy should be an ongoing conversation. One of the keys to maximizing your strategic leadership potential is to facilitate effective strategy conversations. A strategy conversation is a systematic method of encouraging the exchange of ideas, beliefs and opinions on the key strategic elements of a business. In a strategy conversation, the participants mentally move with one another from point to point. Three characteristics promote healthy strategy conversations:

1. **Candor:** The willingness to express honest ideas and opinions.
2. **Suspension:** The discipline to actively listen without judging.
3. **Openness:** The ability to thrive in a situation where the outcome is unknown.

The participants' ability to embrace these criteria can encourage new and different perspectives that can generate breakthrough strategy.

New strategy conversations begin with *dialogue*. A strategy dialogue facilitates the exchange of insights and understanding between two or more people on the important issues of the business. Once the group has exhausted the topics of strategic relevance through dialogue, the facilitator directs the group to begin *discussion*. Through discussion, the group breaks down the insights generated in the exploratory dialogue phase and harnesses them to develop solutions that move things forward. What emerges from

the discussion are the actionable strategies, accountability and implementation that bring the conversation its end result. This is where focus becomes clear, trade-offs are weighed, and decisions are made.

Strategy discussions should not be concentrated at the top; they must take place at every level of the organization. Strategy will remain stranded in the executive suites unless teams throughout the organization can effectively translate broad corporate objectives into concrete action. ●

Conclusion

Just as a helicopter pilot monitors his planned course during flight for conditions that would warrant adjustment, we too must monitor our strategic direction to determine when a change in strategy is appropriate. Here is a checklist of five moments when it is critical to evaluate your strategy:

1. Goals are achieved or changed.
2. Evolution in customer needs.
3. Innovation in the market.
4. Competitors change the perception of value.
5. Capabilities grow or decline.

What's your end game? How will your colleagues, employees and customers describe you? Most important, how will you assess your run? It's not about the little things. It's about how you create the defining moments that shape the trajectory of a team, a business, a life. It's about coalescing insights into competitive advantages that you champion. It's about rising above the fray and seeing things others don't. And you can make that happen, if you're willing to elevate. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Elevate*, you'll also like:

1. ***Moments of Impact* by Chris Ertel, Lisa Kay Solomon.** Learn a creative process by which leaders can make good strategic choices while engaging more people with different perspectives more effectively.
2. ***The Learned Disciplines of Management* by Jim Burkett.** Burkett presents a framework of individual disciplines that form a self-reinforcing management system for making the right things happen.
3. ***The 80/20 Manager* by Richard Koch.** Koch helps managers to focus on the issues that really matter, ask the right questions, find the right connections and realize meaningful achievement for their businesses and themselves.