



# How Excellent Companies Avoid Dumb Things

## Breaking the Eight Hidden Barriers that Plague Even the Best Businesses

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

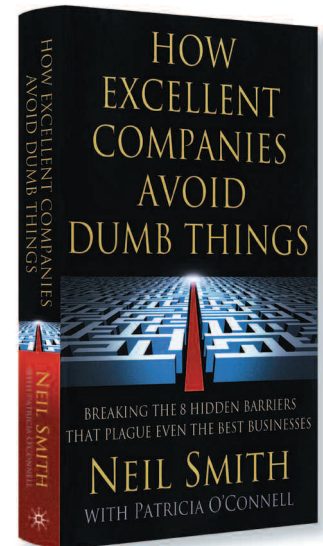
Every day, seemingly intelligent and successful leaders and their companies make headline news because of poor decisions that can cause their businesses to stumble, making many of us scratch our heads in wonder: Why would such a successful business make that strategic decision?

The reason: A series of natural barriers exists in every organization simply because of the way all companies are organized and do business. These are called structural barriers. Other barriers exist because of human nature — these are behavioral barriers. All barriers, individually and collectively, prevent employees from taking actions that are in the best interests of the company. In short, barriers are the reason a company does dumb things, not the employees themselves.

*How Excellent Companies Avoid Dumb Things* highlights the ways in which the eight hidden barriers can interrupt your business, and author Neil Smith outlines a fast, and proven, process in which 12 principles of business transformation can break down the processes that hold companies back.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to identify and break down the eight barriers.
- How to apply the 12 principles to bring about change in your organization.
- How to implement the 100-day change process for breaking barriers.
- The three results of the change process and how they improve your company.



by Neil Smith  
with Patricia O'Connell

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: HOW EXCELLENT COMPANIES AVOID DUMB THINGS

by Neil Smith

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## Introduction: Hidden Gold

Great leaders are men and women with vision — individuals who know exactly the direction an organization should strive toward and who have the skills to take it there.

But the organizations they lead, which are often large and complex, also strive for simplicity and efficiency. Great leaders want to become as efficient as possible in a way that is fast, does not distract from the prime focus of the business, produces very significant results and has the complete buy-in of the organization.

So what is stopping these leaders? A series of natural barriers exists in every organization simply because of the way all companies are organized and do business. We call these structural barriers. Other barriers exist because of human nature. These are behavioral barriers. In short, barriers are the reason a company does dumb things, not the employees themselves.

I have identified the eight hidden barriers that cause excellent companies to do dumb things. Understanding the barriers is only the first step in breaking them down.

The leading letter in each of the eight barriers forms an acronym: “A Promise.” This makes the barriers easy to remember and identify:

- Avoiding Controversy
- Poor Use of Time
- Reluctance to Change
- Organizational Silos
- Management Blockers
- Incorrect Information and Bad Assumptions
- Size Matters
- Existing Processes

One of the important elements to breaking down the barriers is culture change. Culture is about the way companies do things. It is about what is expected, tolerated, encouraged and supported. Culture change is important because it is the key ingredient in breaking down behavioral barriers. It's also key to making sure the barrier remains broken down.

### Barrier 1: Avoiding Controversy

Controversial ideas exist and issues are left unresolved because dealing with them would cause too much disruption. Politics, personalities, alliances and appearances are all factors in why controversy is avoided. Usually these ideas for change have surfaced within a company over and over again because they resolve obvious problems and the issues are often large and strategic.

The solution: Neutralize controversial ideas by making the resolution part of the larger process for change that is not about any one person or project.

### Barrier 2: Poor Use of Time

Even in organizations where people are very busy and long days are the norm, employees use their time very poorly. There are three aspects to this barrier: you and your colleagues do not have the time to do things (“the management of time”); companies use their employees’ time very poorly (“the use of time”); and time isn’t valued appropriately (“the value of time”).

The solution: When breaking this barrier, the first aspect is addressed by changing the way people think and behave. Changing processes addresses the second aspect. Assigning a monetary value to time — something that is often missed — addresses the third aspect.



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## Barrier 3: Reluctance to Change

Of all eight barriers, this is one of the most wide-spread and damaging. People are creatures of habit, and when there is no urgency to change, they will not. Change is stressful because people do not know how it will affect them.

The solution: A good change process will reveal where this barrier exists and will provide a one-time fix by liberating ideas. Sometimes a crisis will provide the impetus to force change to happen. Some barriers are harder to fix than others; there is no easy, long-term solution to this barrier. The real answer comes in creating a culture that expects change to happen.

## Barrier 4: Organizational Silos

Organizational silos create a natural barrier that is tricky to break down because the silos themselves are a necessary evil. Organizations need the structure silos provide — but that same structure prevents the outward flow of information, focus and control.

The solution: Because you cannot always do away with silos, you have to devise ways to connect them. The goal of breaking this barrier is not to smash the silos, but to “turn towers into tunnels” and get people to cooperate across the organization.

## Barrier 5: Management Blockers

Good ideas can get shot down not for perceived lack of merit, but because a manager feels threatened in some way:

- Fear of a boss’ reaction.
- Fear of underlings shining.
- Fear of losing power and influence.
- Fear of having to do work.

Employees are generally powerless in such situations. When Management Blockers are at work, employees feel frustrated and good ideas never get proper consideration.

The solution: Companies have to ensure there are processes that allow ideas to be surfaced and considered in an objective way. But the true long-term solution to breaking this barrier is to force a culture change within the organization that discourages the Management Blockers’ behavior. Breaking this barrier is not so much about changing processes as it is about changing people’s minds.

## Barrier 6: Incorrect Information and Bad Assumptions

The right information to make a decision can be difficult to get because:

## How Poor Use of Time Forces Companies to Do Dumb Things

An investment firm gave customers the option of getting monthly statements online only as part of the firm’s “going green” initiative. When the company saw more than 30 percent of its customers chose to get electronic statements, it expected to reduce complexity and improve customer service while saving money. Yet six months later, senior management realized the company was spending just as much money on monthly statements as before.

Why? The investment firm never stopped printing, processing or mailing the statements. Instead, for customers who switched to electronic statements, it resorted to a simple fix: It changed the customers’ mailing address to its own headquarters. This was done because to stop customer statement delivery required a system-wide reprogramming and the technology department didn’t have time to do it without shifting priorities. The real problem was not solved because of “management of time” in the technology department.

- It does not exist.
- There is too much information so it becomes lost.
- Collecting it is difficult, perhaps because access is limited.
- You have to rely on others to provide it, leading to delay or inaccuracy.
- It may not be timely.

When information is too hard to get, it will be ignored or overlooked and, as a result, assumptions are made. Decisions made using incorrect information or bad assumptions will always yield poor results.

The solution: Make sure that people are basing their decisions on facts — fact-based information should be a company mantra. Do not accept “I guess” or “I think so.”

## Barrier 7: Size Matters

This barrier shows up in a number of ways. A great challenge for companies is to manage the economies related to smaller (less-profitable) customers. Transaction size also matters where small transactions result in a loss. Companies also don’t think about the potential impact that can result from even simple size-based changes in the way they do things.

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The solution: Examine every aspect of your business through a size-based lens. With the Size Matters barrier, not every opportunity is immediately obvious. The approach needs to be this: Look at everything and ask where small sizes cost you money.

### Barrier 8: Existing Processes

This barrier prevents ideas from being implemented, even if they are simple and well-known, and people want to do them. It is caused because there is no process in place to change other processes. The problems to be solved are often not complex; determining how to resolve them without a process to do so, however, is. This causes frustration in customers and employees alike.

The solution: A good change process provides the platform to allow this barrier to be changed and simple ideas to be implemented. But this is the toughest barrier to break in sustainable fashion. A continuous change program, implemented after a change project and run from the CEO, has been shown to work in keeping this barrier at bay. ●

## Twelve Principles for Breaking Barriers

In order to break down the eight barriers, apply the following principles to bring about change and make it last.

**Principle 1: The CEO must personally lead and support any change process carried out across the entire organization and a majority of senior management must also support it.** This is not to say that the CEO has to be involved in every meeting and decision, and it doesn't imply a major time commitment on the CEO's part. But the CEO must declare that change is expected, that the change initiative is his or her project and that it is important. The CEO's subsequent words and behavior must demonstrate that commitment.

This principle gives the project focus, and without that focus, the project will not work. If the CEO does not take the change project seriously, neither will anyone else.

**Principle 2: The entire organization must be engaged in the change process.** You might wonder what the point is of having even the most junior people contribute ideas if those suggestions aren't going to have a big impact on the bottom line. There are five critical reasons for involving everyone:

1. Involving the entire employee base provides a huge psychological benefit. Everyone feels invested in the

change process, has ownership of it and feels included in designing the new organization.

2. It demonstrates that there are no "sacred cows." Every party of the organization is expected to contribute to the change. This sense of equality and fairness is important for getting organizational buy-in for making any changes.

3. Middle management may provide the big-dollar ideas, but small-impact ideas matter. Ideas that have smaller financial impact also tend to be the ones that help the company run better.

4. Taking the entire organization through the change process at the same time creates a cross-organizational momentum. This allows ideas to be considered and quickly resolved by the right people — it introduces a common priority.

5. Occasionally there is a brilliant idea hiding in the work force.

**Principle 3: The project must be guided by "stars" who are willing to challenge the status quo.** Use a small team of internal change agents — the Catalyst Team — who are pulled full-time from their normal roles in the company to work solely on the project. Typically these are people who cannot be spared, not those looking for their next role. They are deliberately assigned to work in areas they are not from and know nothing about.

This creates an interesting dynamic. Because of their everyday roles within the organization, they have the instant credibility that an outsider could never have. They quickly form an independent view of the area they're working in, and they challenge the leader of that area to consider and come up with ideas for improvement.

In selecting a Catalyst Team, look for these four qualities:

1. Intelligence.
2. The ability to be a team player.
3. A passion for change.
4. The ability to get things done.

**Principle 4: There must be no up-front targets for the company as a whole or the individual departments within it.** There are four reasons for not setting targets, all of which have to do with integrity:

1. The amount of change depends on the good ideas that are released when barriers are removed. Before a project starts, no one has any idea what the amount of change is likely to be.

2. The amount of change differs by area. There is no room for a one-size-fits-all approach that comes with

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setting a target. A target that may be right for one department will be wrong for another.

3. When you give managers a number, that is exactly what you'll get out of them — and that is *all* you will get out of them. Some of the opportunity to do things better may be left on the table.

4. Any change brought about by setting targets rather than changing the ways things are done is not sustainable. Within a couple of years, those departments subject to the targets typically return to doing things the same old way.

**Principle 5: Those who will implement an idea must own the idea.** These people may not do so at the start of the process; in fact, these managers, or their departments, may not even be the source of the ideas. But a good change process gives them the chance to become the champion for those ideas, and change comes when people truly believe that they are responsible for implementing it.

**Principle 6: It must be easy to put ideas into the change process but hard to remove them.** To gather ideas and to avoid them from being shot down early, use the mantra that “every idea is a good idea.” That’s not to say every idea will be implemented, but that each idea will be fully considered.

Go against the norm of decision making: Instead of someone having to prove why an idea has merit, someone has to prove why it does not. The idea will be implemented unless someone makes a persuasive argument against it.

Because of this principle and rules governing the process (such as lack of inquests), employees feel more comfortable about offering suggestions, asking dumb questions and thinking creatively. And good creative ideas are hard to dismiss without very good reason.

**Principle 7: Consideration of ideas must be based on facts and analysis, not opinion.** A good change process raises the bar for proof. Managers cannot say, “I think it’s a bad idea.” They need to be armed with facts and information before they can shoot something down. Because beliefs and opinions about a course of action can be wrong, they should be independently tested if possible.

**Principle 8: Consensus must be built.** Of the 12 principles, if there is a “secret sauce” for ensuring 100 percent implementation, then building consensus is it. Consensus is built around an idea by upgrading the idea to include the views of all who consider it. This sometimes requires a compromise to the original idea.

In the consensus-building process, not everyone will agree on everything — and that isn’t the goal. But you

cannot move forward with any idea until and unless you have consensus among the people affected by it.

**Principle 9: There must be a focus on increasing revenue, not just reducing expenses.** You must pay equal attention to opportunities that allow for increasing revenue. Often these ideas will be among the most creative ones from your team. There are four types of ideas for generating revenue:

1. **Stop leakage.** Leakage occurs when you give away your services for free or at a discount, even though the price has already been agreed with your customer and the customer expects to pay the price.

2. **Price for value.** Companies are not very good at understanding the true value of the products and services they deliver to their customers. This is particularly true when there is a premium in delivering the product either very quickly or at a certain time.

3. **Employ behavioral pricing.** A company has behavioral pricing opportunities when it wants to discourage its customers from acting in a certain way. This includes charging a premium for custom services.

4. **Employ market-based pricing.** With certain products or services, it’s possible to charge one price in one geographic market and another price in a different one. Pricing becomes very complicated, as there are multiple price points for the same service. In these cases, companies are not always charging what the market will bear. They can increase prices just to match those of the competition.

Every company has opportunities to increase revenues. You often find employees are more willing to come forward with expense-reduction ideas when a project focuses on both revenues and expenses. So, paradoxically, adding revenues to the equation means increased opportunity for reducing expenses.

**Principle 10: The change process must not disrupt normal business.** Managers will have to delegate more, unnecessary activities may be cut and some people will have to put in some extra work over the course of the project. But it’s critical to commit to this principle because most businesses don’t have the luxury of shutting down for a period of time while a change process takes place.

Companies keep this promise to themselves because they realize they have to keep moving. Delegation to a trusted No. 2 is certainly possible for the short time it takes to do a project, but it’s clearly not sustainable.

**Principle 11: Implementation must be nothing less than 100 percent.** There are six reasons why expectations about the results should be so high:

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1. The ideas have been decided using fact-based analysis, so the costs and implications of any decision are already known before an idea is implemented.

2. The ideas are owned by the managers of the departments who are affected by them, so there is not only buy-in, but also championing of the ideas.

3. The ideas have been publicly committed to.

4. The ideas are tracked by a system that not only keeps managers honest and focused, but also provides an early warning if an idea starts to go off track.

5. The impact of the ideas has been conservatively estimated so that many of the ideas actually produce more impact than was planned.

6. If a particular idea goes off track, a manager is expected to replace the value of the idea. Managers commit to the impact of an idea, even if that idea is derailed through no fault of their own. They have ways to do this readily at hand, either by capturing more impact than planned from other ideas, or by implementing extra ideas on which consensus had not been built or that were previously considered too risky. Managers have an idea bank to dig into if the value of their ideas falls short of expectations.

Once people commit to ideas, they are not allowed to change their minds.

**Principle 12: The change process must be about culture change, not just a completed project.** This is perhaps the most difficult principle to execute against because it's about changing the way people do things not just during the course of the project, but also once it's completed. If culture change does not happen, the behavioral changes that occurred during the project are not sustainable. Here are seven things a senior management team needs to do to drive culture change in an organization:

1. Stress the importance of the project to the organization.
2. Emphasize the logic behind the change in culture.
3. Communicate expectations continuously and frequently.
4. Lead by example.
5. Expose good and bad examples — of both simplicity and complexity — in the organization.
6. Introduce new organizational language that describes the new culture.
7. Change compensation systems. Think of ways of rewarding the results of new behavior, either through regular compensation and bonus systems, or with ad hoc programs. ●

## It's All About Psychology

You might think the most difficult part of the change process is getting enough good ideas out on the table, but, in fact, that turns out to be the easiest. The real challenge is completely different. Companies are made up of human beings, given specific roles and responsibilities, who have many different personalities. Companies benefit hugely from this diversity, as weaknesses in some employees are made up for by the strengths of others. What a good change process is really about is getting all of these different people to share the same focus for long enough to “play the game.” They cannot be spectators to this change process.

“Playing the game” in the context of change means the following:

- Everyone must be included in the process; no part of the company can be allowed not to play.
- Managers can't delegate the process because it's not a high enough priority for them.
- Managers can't ignore the process, thinking or hoping it doesn't really apply to them.
- Managers can't present to play while actually working against the process.
- Good ideas can't be hidden.
- Good ideas can't be undervalued.

The 12 principles provide the rules of the game while the process itself provides the framework. But the real challenge is managing behavior. A good process seeks to identify early any of the errant behaviors just described because each has the potential to undermine it. And then the change process seeks to correct the behavior. ●

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## A 100-Day Process for Breaking Barriers

This process is called the PGI Promise and builds directly from the 12 principles. It is designed to create the environment necessary for change. The process has three major steps — as well as preplanning and implementation phases — and each one culminates in a review meeting before senior management.

Step 1: Focus on surfacing ideas and putting together a comprehensive portfolio of ideas, organized into themes. This leads up to the first review.

Step 2: Focus on valuing risk rating and debating those ideas. This leads up to the second review

Step 3: Focus on building consensus around ideas that

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the company wants to move forward with. This leads up to the third and final review at which a decision is made.

Step 1 lasts four weeks, while Steps 2 and 3 last for a combined 10 weeks. After the final review following Step 3, a two-week implementation planning period transitions into the implementation phase.

### Preplanning (Step 0)

One of the first steps in preplanning is to develop a communications plan to explain to the organization what is going to happen and to enlist everyone's help. The first thing to develop, if it does not naturally exist, is a rationale for doing the project. The first draft is created by the communications team for discussion with Steering Committee Members. Employees will want to know why the project is important to the company and why it is important now. The best rationale is crafted in such a way that a barrier-breaking project is seen as the next logical step for the company to take.

During this phase, the Steering Committee Members also design the Groups and select the Catalyst Team Members and Group Leaders. Also, the small finance team establishes the initial baselines for each Group Leader. The Group Leaders will have the chance to question the baselines later, but the initial round of forming the Groups' baselines takes place during the preplanning stage. The Human Resources team assigns organizational positions to each of these Groups as well.

### Surfacing Ideas (Step 1)

In Step 1, the activity is focused around collecting and organizing ideas. The goal is a clean portfolio of ideas that covers all costs or revenues of the group. Surfacing ideas is the easiest part of the change process — rarely is there a shortage of ideas.

By the first Steering Committee Review — at the end of the first four weeks — a Group Leader's goal is to have developed a complete portfolio of ideas with the promise of financial savings and changing the way the Group does business. Group Leaders and their teams will have:

- Confirmed that their baseline is correct.
- Generated hundreds, if not thousands, of ideas that affect their Group.
- Removed duplicates and organized those ideas by topic.
- Attached rough value and assigned initial risk rating to each idea.
- Figured out which key analyses they need to do.

During the first Steering Committee Review, Catalyst Team Members assist each Group Leader to present their initial ideas for review. The Steering Committee Members have been primed by the Catalysts Team Members about the Group Leaders' progress and about any missing ideas. The Steering Committee Members also use the first review to test the Group Leaders' commitment. After the first review meeting, Group Leaders need to identify analysis that will be needed to support ideas going forward.

### Valuing, Risk Rating and Debating (Step 2)

The goal of Step 2 is to: accurately value all the ideas in the portfolio; coordinate ideas across groups; learn about the risks of the ideas from those potentially affected by them; and debate how to overcome those risks.

Following valuation — in which each monetary gain from each idea if implemented is estimated — and coordination across the groups, all people affected by an idea participate in risk rating it, based on how risky they perceive it to be: low, medium or high. Anytime an idea is rated medium or high, the risk rater must explain, which allows debate to begin. During this step, the Group Leaders and Catalyst Team Members begin to understand who is opposed to each idea and why. This is the first stage in beginning to build consensus.

Step 2 is followed by the second Steering Committee Review. By the end of this step, there will be coordination across the Groups, savings will be calculated accurately and much of the risk rating will have been completed. This review is also the time when Steering Committee Members fully understand the ideas and begin to debate them. The goal for the Steering Committee is to encourage Group Leaders to be as aggressive as they can be in thinking about ways to change their business without introducing unnecessary risk to the organization.

### Building Consensus (Step 3)

Consensus isn't about selecting the lowest common denominator of an idea — the place where everyone accepts there is no risk. It isn't about everyone being in perfect agreement and harmony. It's about reducing the risk associated with an idea to a level that all affected parties are comfortable with while not compromising the idea's value. The benefits must outweigh the risks.

By Step 3, the number of ideas still in play will have been dramatically reduced: duplicates will have been removed, similar ideas will have been consolidated and truly high-risk ideas will have been put onto the back burner.

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A key aspect of building consensus is “upgrading” ideas — moving as many ideas to the low-risk category as possible. Upgrading can be about splitting ideas and figuring out what its low-risk and high-risk components are. It can be about changing an idea to accommodate a specific concern. And it can be about reducing the scope of an idea if it’s overextending.

The main part of the Catalyst Team Members’ job at this stage is to find creative ways to think about ideas and ferret out opportunities for compromise and brokered solutions. Out of all their responsibilities, the Catalyst Team Member’s role in building consensus is the most vital. It is better to abandon an idea than to commit to one without consensus because objectors will find a way to kill it eventually.

Step 3 is followed by the final Steering Committee Review. The goal of this review is to make decisions. At this point the Steering Committee have debated the major and controversial ideas at least twice. At this stage it is very clear which ideas will be approved and which will be rejected.

## Implementation Planning

First, approved ideas must be gathered into projects, then each project is assigned to a Project Manager who is responsible for the implementation of the ideas within the project. The Group Leader then assigns timing to the ideas. Implementation can occur over 36 months; the Group Leader is asked to assign a preferred completion time to each idea. While the group implementation plan is being formed, other areas, such as HR, technology, finance and more, are also planning and preparing for implementation.

As implementation begins and people see change happening, they expect not only rapid change, but continuous change going forward. People expect their ideas to be listened to in the future, not ignored. The process has changed the culture of the organization. ●

## Mining Gold: The Results to Expect

Making the way you do things simpler is one of the key results coming out of a barrier-busting project. The results fall into three categories: 1) Reducing complexity; 2) Financial impact; and 3) Culture change.

**Reducing Complexity.** Change ideas that are most often approved involve reducing complexity within an organization and making life simpler for employees. The types of approved ideas also range from very large strate-

gic business ideas to small ideas that change the way a process works. Big, controversial ideas get raised in a safe environment. But smaller ideas are equally important and you cannot lose sight of them. While their financial impact may be low, they contribute hugely to reducing complexity.

**Financial Impact.** By far the most staggering result of a good change process is the financial impact. It is one of the measures of success and one that cannot be argued with. Not all of the financial impact needs to be taken to the bottom line — the company can choose how much it saves and how much it spends. The large size of the results allows companies to reinvest some money for growth, as well as to improve shorter-term profits.

**Culture Change.** The culture change that a project brings about is just as important as the financial change. Culture change is critical to breaking the three behavioral barriers: No. 1, Avoiding Controversy; No. 3, Reluctance to Change; and No. 5, Management Blockers. And it is an important to fixing elements of two other barriers: No. 2, Poor Use of Time and No. 8, Existing Processes. It’s also the key in ensuring new ideas are surfaced rather than hidden going forward.

Organizations need to make sure that they don’t revert to their old way of doing things. If companies don’t take extra steps to preserve the culture change, the danger is that there will be no ongoing pressure on the managers to continue to change their behavior. In that case, behaviors will revert to previous patterns, barriers will reappear and good ideas will be left unimplemented once more.

## What Are You Waiting For?

The results of the change process include more invigorated, more efficient employees; happier, more satisfied customers; millions of dollars realized in increased profits or for investment; and a simpler way of doing things. Nirvana? It sounds like it. What do you have to lose? Why wouldn’t your company undertake a project like this? ●

### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *How Excellent Companies Avoid Dumb Things*, you’ll also like:

1. ***Great by Choice* by Jim Collins and Morten T. Hansen.** In this Soundview Featured Book Review, the authors enumerate the principles for building a truly great enterprise in unpredictable, tumultuous and fast-moving times.
2. ***Who’s in the Room?* by Bob Frisch.** How do companies really make choices? Frisch provides perspective on the true nature of decision-making.
3. ***Taking People With You* by David Novak.** Novak offers a step-by-step guide to setting big goals, getting people to work together, blowing past your targets and celebrating after you shock the skeptics.