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# 9LENSES INSIGHT TO ACTION

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A SOCIAL APPROACH TO  
BUSINESS OPTIMIZATION

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**BY EDWIN MILLER**  
Entrepreneur & 4-Time CEO

9LENSES MEDIA™



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## DEDICATION

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Thank you to all the leaders who have shaped my thinking, and thus the **9Lenses**, throughout the years. To those who've worked alongside me, especially my board members, you provided me both the opportunity to lead and the guidance to succeed—thank you. A special thank you to my mother and father. In running their own small family business, they gave me a front row seat where I learned so many valuable lessons that have served me well at every point of my personal and professional life. Thank you to my basketball coaches, who made it possible for me to get a quality education and taught me so much that I later found applicable to the sport of business. To my dear children, Jackson the loyal, Gabrielle the faithful, and Charlie the determined, whom I love very much, I dedicate all that I've learned and accomplished, and all that I will strive to learn and improve every day. Thank you to the Lord, my Savior, for His grace on my life. And finally, I thank my wife Kimberly for her support, love, guidance, and counseling over the years. She is the tenth lens.

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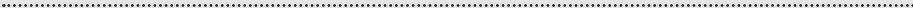
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THE 9LENSSES



SUBLENSSES



THEMES



DIAGNOSTICS



FOREWORD BY

# DR. ROY HINTON

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Associate Dean of Executive Programs,  
George Mason University School of Management

For a person in a leadership position or someone aspiring to be in a leadership position, reading this book will make a valuable and essential contribution to your career success. I first met Edwin Miller at George Mason University. A friend of his had suggested that he talk to someone on campus about his ideas and whether they might be valuable for business education. With his usual enthusiasm, wit, and humor, Edwin walked us through his model for leadership and management. What occurred to me at that time was that this man was a natural field researcher. Edwin had been meticulously tracking his experiences—what worked and what didn’t—and organizing those into a framework for formulating the key questions that all managers should be asking as they capture and deploy resources to fulfill the mission of their unit or their entire organization. For Edwin there was a clear distinction between mistakes and failure. Each mistake, while costing him or his organization something, was not a failure, but simply an opportunity for him to think about what he could have done to prevent it and to explore other potential mistakes before they occurred.

We continued to meet over the next few months and with each meeting the scope and depth of Edwin’s work became more apparent. The result is that the Executive Programs at George Mason are employing the **9Lenses** as the primary design tool for executive education. The **9Lenses** assessment reveals strengths and gaps in each of the Lenses resulting in opportunities for efficient learning. The results serve as a guide to the design, development, and delivery of learning experiences. The analytical tools created by **9Lenses** allow us to tailor our executive education program precisely to the needs of its participants. This is a powerful pull-through approach to executive education that saves time and money for managers and their employers, and provides shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities for the firm.

The **9Lenses** offers much more than a platform for learning experience design. It serves as an antidote to the crisis of our times, which is information overload. Smart phones, email, Internet search, and vast databases challenge our capacity to convert data to information and information to knowledge. We have more information available in a moment than managers just twenty years ago had available in months or even years. In this dynamic and complex decision environment, opportunities open and close in months or weeks instead of years. Pressures on business leaders for rapid decisions and action are greater than ever. They have access to more information than at any time in history to help them make decisions, but less time than ever before to understand and interpret that information. The **9Lenses** and the tools Edwin has developed can help us effectively cope with this dilemma.

**Edwin has identified five core objectives for any leader:**

- 01.** Clarity
- 02.** Collective learning, enthusiasm, and teamwork
- 03.** Alignment
- 04.** Intelligent and measurable strategy
- 05.** Accountability, empowerment, and sense of ownership

Most of us are weary of hearing yet another list of essential traits, behaviors, and tasks for effective leadership and I would urge you to stop here if there was nothing else to gain from this book, but there is much more. Edwin has developed a powerful organizing framework for data capture, analysis, and decision support and this framework directly supports these five leadership objectives. The **9Lenses** framework guides you and your team through the exploration of multiple scenarios and the generation of answers to core questions that provide clarity, collective learning, teamwork, and alignment. His framework takes you through a simple process for generating

an intelligent and measurable strategy, and in the process creates accountability, empowerment, and ownership.

The **9Lenses** is a map for analysis as well as a foundation for processes and structures to achieve superior performance within your firm. It begins with assessments about the core assets of the organization—its markets, its people, and its finances. What do you need to know about these resources? What changes are called for and how do you make those changes? The framework then moves onto three core processes—developing strategy, building the operations required to deploy the strategy, and successfully executing and measuring strategy. Processes are dynamic and provide recurrent feedback to one another. The last three Lenses pertain to the structure of the firm—expectations that drive assessments and organize actions, internal governance, and legal entity construction. Each lens is further organized into sub-lenses and themes, allowing the reader to benefit from a comprehensive and cohesive model for knowledge capture. When asked why he chose these nine lenses, Edwin simply answers that this framework allowed him to organize all the thinking and questions that occurred to him throughout his career and everything that he needs now to guide him in fulfilling the essential tasks of the leader.

Edwin's experience as CEO of several companies has allowed him to capture the core principles underlying business success. While his ability to assess, interpret, and organize information in such a way that it becomes useful knowledge is extraordinary, it is only part the reason for his successful performance as a four-time CEO. In the background of what he does is what he is—an individual with great integrity, principles, and commitment. These show up in his enthusiasm for life and his unmatched work ethic. I urge you to read this book and also to read between the lines. It is a story about living as well as learning. Incorporate the **9Lenses** into your professional life

and generate your own core questions that are unique to your current position. Use this book to make a difference in your career, in your organization, and in the lives of all those who benefit from your confident and informed leadership.



# PROLOGUE

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You could say I was born in the wrong place at the wrong time. I grew up poor in a house with a leaky roof, no air conditioning, running water that shut off when the well went dry in the summer, and a telephone line we shared with the neighbors. Hard to believe it was the 1970s, but this was living in rural Georgia. My father had a 6th grade education and ran away to join the army when he was a teenager. He worked 100 hours a week and wasn't around much. My mother's formative experience was witnessing my grandfather be murdered by his own brother—my great uncle. This was merely the most dramatic incident in a family history often visited by alcohol and violence. It wasn't the greatest infrastructure for success—or was it?

I was the first person in my family to go to college. This was no easy task, but what is in life? In elementary school I was labeled learning disabled and sent to a teacher for “extra help” because I couldn't comprehend what I was reading. My report cards always came home with a handwritten footnote in red ink from the principal; the tone ranged from exasperation to pity. To make this more colorful, there was only one elementary, middle, and high school in the entire county of Oglethorpe, which is the fourth largest county in landmass in all of Georgia. Both of my siblings dropped out of high school but later achieved their Georgia Equivalency Diplomas. It was simply tough to accomplish anything in that area of the Country. My favorite hobbies as a teenager were hunting, shooting pool, riding my motorcycle, and playing basketball. The first one brought home dinner if we were lucky, the second brought home trouble, the third one truly almost killed me, and the fourth one sent me to college. Nothing about these formative years created a confident and well-adjusted young man.

Even my basketball career, which opened so many doors for me, didn't go as smoothly as it should have. I broke records for shooting accuracy and played for a team that represented



the USA in international competition. But I struggled to fit in both on- and off-court at my second university, and broke my hand three days after announcing my intent to transfer. At that point it was hard to find anyone who would even give me a scholarship. And just when I had found the right situation academically and athletically, I broke my jaw and had to play the rest of the season with it wired shut, drinking dinner from a straw—this was after opening the season sinking my first nine three point shots in a row. I think it's fair to say I never lived up to my potential as a ballplayer. It wasn't so much the injuries as my lack of mental toughness. It would be years before I stopped feeling insecure, stopped questioning my basic identity and purpose, and stopped trying to do everything all at once because I was so terrified of failure. What a paradox. The things that drive us to create something special is so often is the bane of our existence.

I probably surprised you with the beginning of this story, and I'm likely going to surprise you with the ending too. This is the part where I'm supposed to tell you that I turned my grades around (I did), that I turned my life around (I did), that I found my true calling as a businessman (I did). Then I should trumpet the stuff my publicist wrote on the dust jacket of this book, all the accomplishments and accolades. Then I'm supposed to say I believed in myself all along. That hard work, tenacity, and willpower are all it takes for a person to succeed in this world. This is the part where I'm supposed to reveal myself as an Ayn Rand style superman.

But I'm not. Traumas and tough experiences don't define us because we heroically overcome them. They define us because they stick with us even after we've survived them, if we allow them to—they shape us into the person that we can become. That's why I think I was born in the right place at the right time. Even though many would say I was dealt a bad hand, I'm grateful for everything I learned. I'll never forget

the way I grew up, and I never want to. It was a blessing. It helps me remember how connected and fragile everything is, how things can change in business and in life from one minute to the next, how we all live without a safety net. It helps me remember that the true measure of excellence is our steady effort rather than our periodic results. It helps me remember how to assess people, how to tell the difference between those who really care and those who only care how something can benefit them. It helps me remember that there's no such thing as someone unworthy of love.

I was formed and shaped by circumstances and environment, by disadvantages and advantages, sometimes despite these and other times because of these. I was shaped by my mother and father, by my brother—who truly shaped and saved my life—my sister—a creative genius, my teammates in all forms of competition, and all my coaches and mentors. By my colleagues and partners. By my wife and children. And by a divine guidance that has a purpose for each of us. My life story is made of resilience, tenacity, and passion. We have read about these traits in other leaders and found their stories to be inspiring. It will put a bounce in our step when we are on our way out the door in the morning—a frame of mind that will allow us to take on the world. However, we also need to learn and embody something else—something that will last us all a lot longer. Allow me put it as simply as I can here. I want each of us to learn the power of humility by listening to the answers that are all around each of us—every day.

# A PREVIEW OF THE 9LENSES

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**"As comforting as it can be to look to external expertise as a panacea for our problems, the more powerful and actionable knowledge is already available to us internally in our business."**

---

**"The road to self insight runs through other people."**

**— DAVID DUNNING**

At some point in our business lives, no matter how smart and successful we are, all of us get lost in the woods. Patterns and connections that once seemed so clear and easy to discern suddenly become elusive. You know what this feels like. It's frustrating, perhaps even frightening. You've reached an inflection point, but you're not sure what the next move should be. Leading an organization and making good decisions requires an understanding of context, but since today's business world is so fast, fluid, dynamic, and complex, that context varies uniquely from one situation to the next, and from one moment to the next. How are we supposed to find the right analytical context for something that is always changing? How do we predict, interpret, and respond to change, or for that matter, even know a change has occurred? We need a comprehensive and cohesive framework that is sensitive to the unique context of our company and flexible to its daily transformations. We need a way to view particular aspects of the business in close focus, but also to connect them together into a complete whole so we can identify when problems or opportunities arise. Attaining this kind of clarity requires intelligence and experience, but that's not enough. We also need the right tools.

Let's think of our business like a dirty car window. That film of dust and grime that impedes our view didn't get there all at once; it has slowly accumulated over time. Sometimes we can't even tell how dirty the windshield is until the sunlight hits it just right, and then suddenly we can't see five feet in front of us. Sometimes we don't think to get a carwash until the rain comes and takes care of that for us. Think of the sunshine as a business opportunity. If we can't see the good things that lie right in front of our path, we can't capitalize on them. Think of the rain as a business problem. It forces us slow down and puts us in immediate danger of losing our grip on the road, but it might prompt us to make timely interventions to prevent further problems. Although in either case you're much better off having a clean windshield in the first place.

Figure 01

In his excellent book **The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness**, Stephen Covey cites a Harris Interactive Poll that surveyed 23,000 U.S. residents employed full-time within key industries and in key functions. Consider some of the results of this poll:



**Now suppose we gave a similar survey to a soccer team, and received similar answers.**

- **Only 4 in 11** players on the field would know which goal they were supposed to be advancing toward and which one they were supposed to be defending.
- **Only 3 in 11** would care.
- **Only 2 of the 11** players would know which position they played and what they were supposed to do.
- **All but 2** players would, in some way, be competing against their own team members rather than against the opponent.

Every person involved with our company, every stakeholder, sees things a little differently. Someone may notice the dirt on the windshield long before we do. Then again some of your stakeholders may be distracted, looking out the side windows or the rear windshield, fiddling with the radio dial, or wrestling with their seatbelts. Getting all of our people looking forward in the same direction, but empowering them to offer their diverse perspectives and ideas creates a profound strategic advantage. But this is easier said than done, and it happens more rarely than we might think.

This transposition of context starkly illustrates the value of clarity, collective understanding, and alignment. If I'm a player on a soccer field and I don't know which goal to shoot towards, how is my team going to win? Even if my coach encourages me to take a shot, how do I know it's not at my own goalie? How can anyone on the team generate enthusiasm in this kind of environment—an environment where only 3 in 11 of the players would care? It seems ridiculous, but in reality it happens all the time, especially in organizations where the “coach” tries to lead individually rather than empower and create accountability collectively.

Did you ever wonder why your employees are always clicking off that Facebook window in their browsers when you walk by the desk, or jamming their smartphones into their pockets? Of course everyone likes to have an occasional break from work, and it's fun to stay in touch with friends and family, but the core appeal of social networking applications is that they let you contribute something to the discussion. They also provide a structure or framework that puts those contributions into a relevant context. It's easy to understand the impulse to read restaurant reviews on Yelp or hotel reviews on TripAdvisor, but to understand what compels people to take time out of their busy schedules to write reviews that will be read by anonymous strangers, we need to consider what Paul Ford calls the "why wasn't I consulted?" factor. I don't think it's unrealistic to say that if we consulted our people before or even alongside our consultants, and provided them a real forum to contribute and collaborate to what really matters at their workplace, they might get glued to it in the same way, not only to make their contributions but also to check up on everyone else's. Why not channel this impulse instead of thwarting it? And why not extend this logic beyond your employees to your other stakeholders?

## ENTER THE 9LENSES

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We know that no two businesses are alike. And nobody knows the ins and outs of our company better than our key stakeholders—like our employees. With **9Lenses**, we can tap this invaluable resource for insights that make a real difference. Analyze our company from every perspective. What works. What doesn't. Discover new strengths. Pinpoint knowledge gaps that prevent you from realizing your full potential. Solve problems from a holistic point of view.

Figure 02



**9Lenses** gives our company the clarity and focus it needs to succeed—now and in the future.

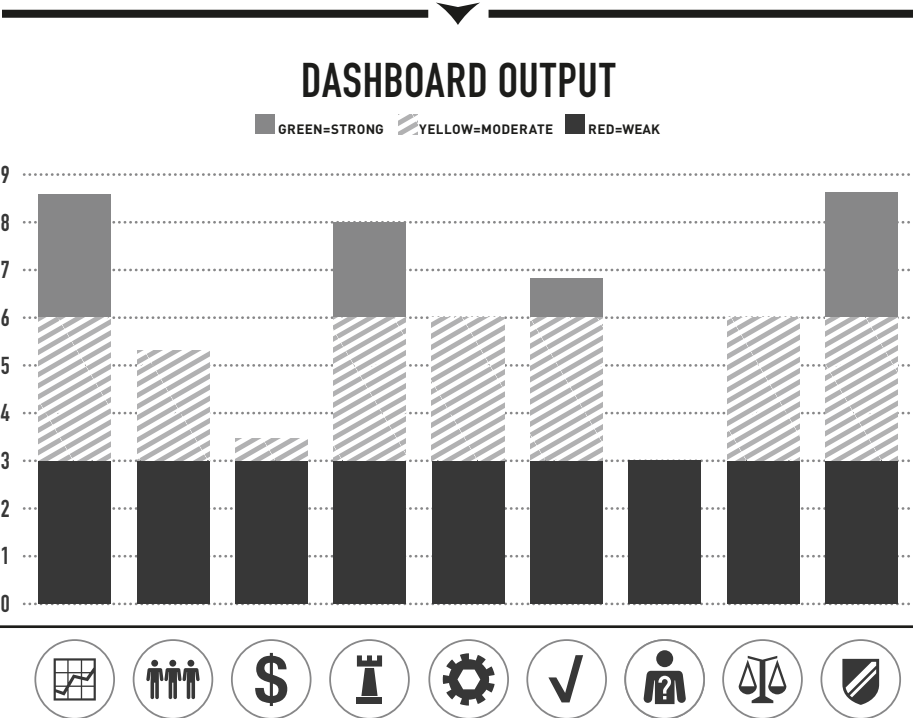
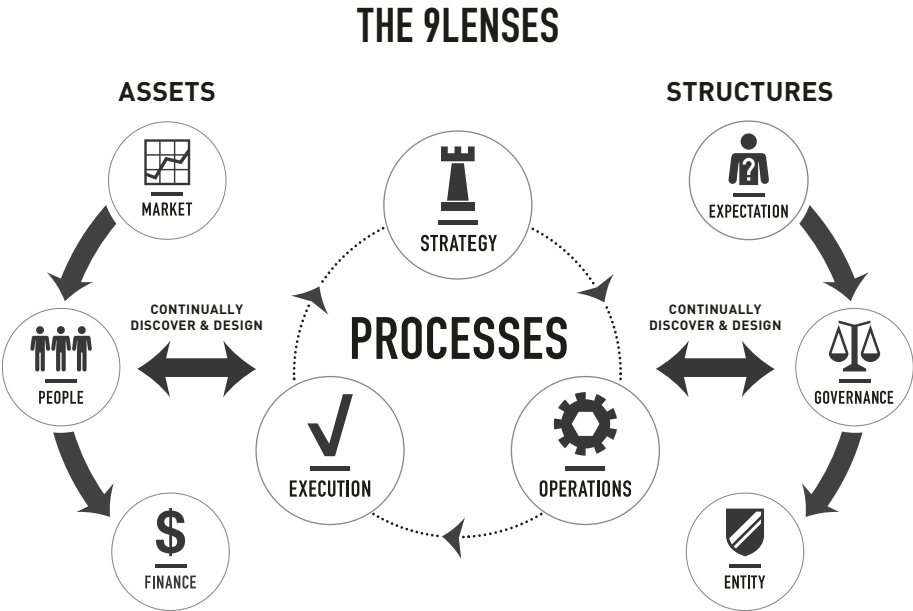
This dream of social business optimization inspired the development of the **9Lenses**. The goal is to render complex and potentially overwhelming business decisions comprehensible and actionable by facilitating a collective learning approach that generates continuous measurement and flexibly incorporates new insights. The lenses represent nine distinct areas of every business that are nonetheless intricately connected. For instance, if we decide to change our **strategy lens**, it will impact our **market, people, finance, operations, execution, expectations, governance, and entity lenses**. Having a connected framework puts us in a better position



to formulate needed changes and allows us to anticipate the impact of these changes across our entire organization. It helps every stakeholder in our business understand how his actions relate meaningfully with everyone else's. Taken together, the **9Lenses** encompass the **assets, processes, and structures** that drive business success. We will explore these categories in more detail in chapters 5, 6, and 7, but for now a brief overview will suffice.

As our leadership team and other employees learn about the organization and contribute to each other's learning, all participants gain knowledge and skills that integrate to create a coherent, consistent, and comprehensive view of the business—a clean windshield. Each of the nine lenses contains **sub-lenses** for more granular analysis, and each of these sub-lenses is further divided into key **themes**. The themes open into thousands of **diagnostics** that allow us to adapt and evolve the **9Lenses** outputs to the unique situation of our business, so the leadership team can address areas that require precise intervention, while staying focused on the big picture. *Figure 03* illustrates the web application workflow and the initial **9Lenses** dashboard output; as we go along I'll show you many more of these outputs. The **9Lenses** analytics deliver a rich portrait of the insights and perceptions that are already latent within your organization, making it easy for you to pinpoint knowledge, communication, and process bottlenecks that prevent it from realizing its full potential.

Figure 03



### **A social approach to business optimization allows us to:**

- Include employees, customers, partners, and other stakeholders in the analysis process to create an assessment baseline that captures the unique nature of the business.
- Generate an inter-disciplinary, cross-functional and multi-level view that can help us evaluate and improve our projects, programs, and product lines.
- Quantify our employees' understanding and guide their focus toward targeted improvement and continued success.
- Harness the power of interactive media to gain a dynamic overview of an entire organization.
- Nurture participation, collective learning, and accountability, giving us true group thinking instead of just groupthink.

Through interactive content and web applications, **9Lenses** allows us to develop a socially networked analysis of our company that generates specific data for each lens and integrated analytics for all of them together. Most of the business assessment software currently available in the market tends to diagnose problem areas that are narrowly focused in specific domain silos. This leaves us with rich content in a particular area of focus, but without a complete and holistic perspective it can be difficult to connect learning to action. Moreover, many of these programs are designed for one-time, single-user input. Instead of incorporating inputs entered once or twice by a small executive or assessment team, the **9Lenses** cloud methodology allows for continuous assessment and monitoring of progress that empowers social transactions and is powered by them.

Figure 04



Figure 05



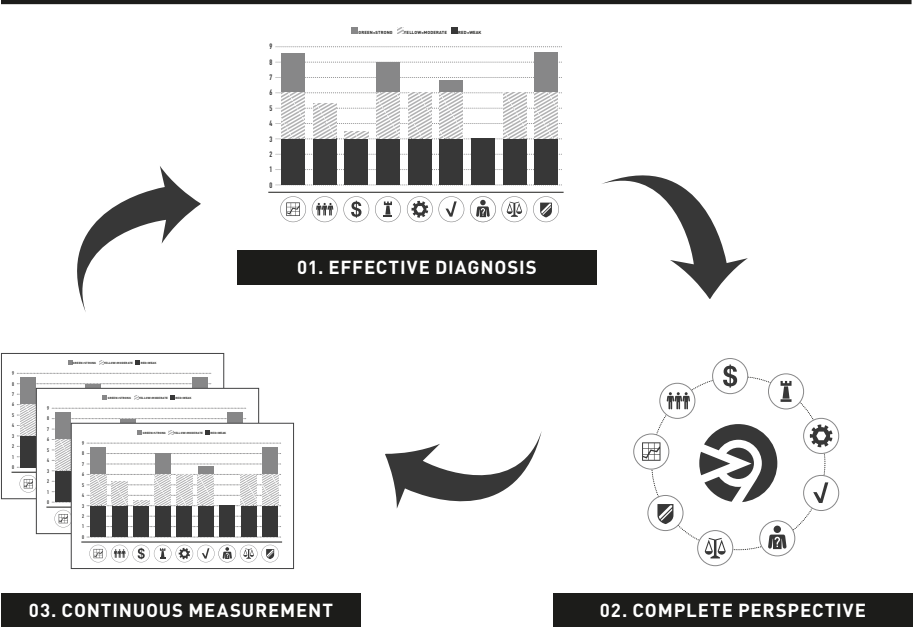
Just because we’ve always done business in a certain way and we’re doing OK, doesn’t mean that approach is best. Remember the adage, if you always do what you’ve done, you’ll always get what you’ve got. And our situation may not be quite what we think it is. Maybe our competitors are seeing possibilities we’ve missed, or maybe there are opportunities that everyone in our vertical market is overlooking. How can we see what we don’t see? Both separately and together, the nine **lenses** illuminate those dirty areas on the windshield, and they do so by directly engaging the people in the company. You might not believe this until you see for yourself, but with the right tools business optimization can actually be fun. The **9Lenses** coordinate sales, marketing, finance, operations, and IT so they can work seamlessly together and drive our business forward, well beyond “OK.” And they give us the **clarity** we need to become more focused as leaders, not by reinventing the wheel but by articulating a cutting edge metadata structure that captures, in one streamlined platform, all of the great things that successful leaders have always done.

**The 9Lenses optimization occurs in three stages, though after the first round of diagnostics these become a continuous feedback loop:**

01. In the **social discovery** phase, we assess and understand our **market, people, and financial assets**.
02. In the **social design** phase, we build and align our **strategy, operations, and execution processes**.
03. In the **social assurance** phase, we communicate our **expectations** and affirm that our **governance** and **entity structures** are helping us meet our objectives.

Why nine **lenses**? And how do we use those lenses to understand our interactions with customers, partners, directors, and shareholders? I'll answer these questions in more detail later, but for now I want to point out that you may already know some of the answers. Throughout our business lives, we've all been learning content that is located within one or more of these nine areas; in the pages that follow I'll offer high praise to some of my favorite business authors and you'll probably think of some of your own favorites. The problem is that we can't always interconnect, contextualize, and activate this theoretical content in a way that speaks to the practical dilemmas we face on a daily basis. I'm not offering a trick or a shortcut. Some people ask me if two or three lenses would be enough, but I caution them not to confuse clarity with simplicity. We should always consider the whole business in all of its complexity. Although it can be comforting to look to external expertise as a panacea for our problems, the more powerful and actionable knowledge is already available to us internally, through our own expertise and that of our various stakeholders. All we need is a tool for turning on this faucet.

Figure 06



Being human, we tend to focus on what we know best, and this bias doesn't magically disappear when we move higher in the organizational ladder. Even for CEOs. Marketing experts may know how to take a product into the right channels, but they might be less certain about how to get that product made efficiently, or what sales margin on the product will meet the annual net income goal. Should we leave those production decisions to the COO? What about their strategic implications? Should we leave those pricing decisions to the sales team? To the CFO? And what IT infrastructure do we need to support the product? How much will it cost? Are our current systems compatible? I'm not picking on marketing; an expert in any single segment or function is vulnerable to this same problem. And if we're honest with ourselves, most of us tend to be natural or trained experts in a single segment or function. Whether you are a CEO, department head, mid-level manager, or line

employee, the **9Lenses** can improve your understanding of how all aspects of the business work together. This **clarity** makes it much easier for you to perform your specialized functions and contribute the type of management appropriate to your level and group.

The **9Lenses** provide a framework for change leadership and leadership change. By assessing the specific dilemmas and opportunities your business faces at any given moment, you can drive **execution** that aligns your investment in the company's cultural ecosystem with the necessities of its bottom line. You can then leverage this focus toward the design of a customized remediation and improvement plan to address present needs. Once this initial remediation is complete, you can maintain a continuous assessment, learning, and alignment cycle that harnesses the power of **social discovery**, **social design**, and **social assurance**. This engages leaders at every level of your company to participate in a comprehensive, sustainable, and scalable collaboration that can flexibly respond to both expected and unexpected challenges. I refer to the **9Lenses** alternately as a media content pipeline, a metadata structure, a web software application suite, and a data platform, because it is all of these. But above all it is a process of transformation that you lead within your organization, and that you tailor to its unique strengths.

The **9Lenses** system encompasses years of hard work, particularly in turnaround to growth situations. It also reflects the wisdom I'm grateful to have absorbed from the terrific people I've worked with over the years. And it profits from my mistakes—I'll pay particular attention to these in the chapters that follow. There are no easy solutions to building, growing, or turning around a business. The solution is something different every time, and the technique and tempo for implementing that solution depend on the unique context of the organization. I have found this framework of nine lenses to be a consistently useful means for creating **clarity** in my own decision-

making process, and for using this clarity to guide coherent organizational change. I have been frustrated, as you surely are too, that the readily available tools for diagnosing and improving company performance—management curricula, training modules, books, magazines, and scholarly journals, consulting services, etc.—focus on specific domain silos and neglect the power of social engagement and the inevitability of continuous change in our businesses.

**To summarize the scenario I have laid out in this chapter, we as business leaders need a framework that provides:**

- The ability to assess, understand, and align a company based on the opportunities and dilemmas of its unique industry and situation, not a one-size-fits-all approach.
- A proactive orientation that anticipates what we don't know and keeps up with the speed of change and competition in a global marketplace.
- Focused training programs to target and remediate the gaps in a business while improving the employees' knowledge and engaging their commitment, not just training for training's sake.
- Integrated media, software, and data with a social networking process at the core rather than tacked on as an afterthought.
- Intelligence and analytics to guide strategy formation and determine a clear path forward to implementation.

I hope you'll make yourself at home in the **9Lenses**. There are many different methods for using them, and they can aid businesses in many different scenarios and workflows. You can use the platform to understand your current **assets, processes,**



and **structures**, but you can also use it to evaluate an investment or takeover decision, or to map out the implications of adding new partners, customers, or product lines. What would happen if 20, 50, or 100 of your people responded to the **9Lenses social discovery** baseline? What divergences in their perspective would you see? What inconsistencies in their knowledge would appear? Which of these would be productive and which would be unproductive? How much wider might these divergences and inconsistencies become when you move further from the CEO's office and closer to the customer? Please enjoy the rest of this book. It will provide you plenty of food for thought and a comprehensive and cohesive framework for learning and planning as you consider where your business can go in the months and years to come. The crux of the matter is that our employees know our business inside and out. Are we ready to listen? What do we need to know about our business, right now, that our employees already know, but are not saying except around the water cooler?



# WHY DO WE NEED CONNECTED LENSES?

---

**“Too many companies lack clarity across all functional areas, and meanwhile they are working like mad to come up with one new strategy after another. The definition of insanity is repeating the same action and expecting a different outcome.”**

---

**“Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense.”**

**— GERTRUDE STEIN**

Let me take you back to inside sales in 1993—my first role as a businessman right out of college. It was the very beginning of the Internet age, and the people buying our service offerings were innovators and early adopters. All of these buyers had business problems, but when we talked on the phone they were mainly asking me technology questions. I soon realized that to dig down to the root, to the real pain they were experiencing and the real solutions they needed, a sales representative had to speak “techie.” After reading every technology book I could find, building my own Linux box, learning to navigate the command prompt in a native IP environment on a Sun workstation, and studying all I could about LAN and WAN protocols, I became so comfortable in that realm that I drifted toward the IT discipline in my career path.

My new tech-savvy approach led to a great sales track record with those innovators and early adopters, but at the same time it made it difficult to articulate the value proposition of the Internet to the mainstream market. I became a victim of my own knowledge. The more I learned about technology, the more I felt comfortable discussing technology, and the harder time I had translating techie back to English. My experience echoed that of the larger business culture. Jeffrey Moore has called this phenomenon “the chasm.” The chasm appears when a company that has built its early growth with technology buyers strives to reach the promised land of mainstream buyers. I feel lucky that I found my way to other business skills, thanks to mentors who made an investment in me and thanks to an ever changing and highly competitive market segment that never let me sit idle and rest. But when I became a hired CEO at the ripe age of 30, I only had a few notions about what it took to be a focused leader. I thought the job of an executive, sales director, marketing director, or finance manager was just to make things happen. Making things happen is part of the equation for creating successful outcomes, but as I quickly learned that alone is not enough.

Another big part of the equation is the role we carve out for ourselves as leaders. There are many roles that foster organizational success; one size does not fit all. And this is not just the case for upper management. Though we rarely get the chance to define our job and the exact nature of its functions, we all define our role. In college I was fortunate to have my basketball scholarship, but in the summers I had to work to make ends meet. The summer before my junior year, my job was cleaning toilets and washing cars at an auto body shop. I remember getting praise from the owner one day when he saw me working up a sweat, buffing a car with both hands. He said he admired my drive and passion. Because I took myself seriously, I created a role in that workplace in which I was taken seriously. We all have that choice. We can be driven, focused, innovative, engaging, and much more. That doesn't guarantee any particular outcome, but without it we don't even give ourselves the opportunity to win. If we demonstrate passion and integrity, the customers we come into contact with will notice. Our teammates will see someone who wants to succeed, and wants the team to succeed. Our managers will feel assured of our commitment.

Every day, businesses are becoming faster, flatter, and less linear, as we all become knowledge workers and our work becomes more tightly connected cross-functionally. The person in accounts receivable is as important as the person selling the new business accounts. The person selling new business accounts is as important as the account manager. And none of these jobs would even exist if the people in manufacturing or development weren't building the product we sell. Even if we consider one level or function to be important than another at a given moment, the dynamic nature of the contemporary marketplace is sure to make some other level or function assume greater importance the next moment.

Do you enjoy your role in your organization? That one's easy to answer, and it's really worth thinking about. I bet if I asked

the other people who work alongside you if you enjoy your role, they could answer pretty easily too. Do you know how your job impacts every part of the stakeholder map? If not, it's probably not your fault. In some organizations you might even be discouraged from thinking about this question. And if you are discouraging your own team from thinking about the systemic importance of their work, think twice. Do they define their roles or do you? Are their incentive plans aligned to reward them when they drive success for the company? Do you win and lose as a team?

## THE FIVE JOBS OF A FOCUSED LEADER

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I've now talked a little bit about versatility, a little about making things happen, and a little about role-making. These are fundamental prerequisites for success, but a skeptic might say I'm making pretty broad recommendations that might apply to just about any context. So now I'll get more specific and tell you about the five objectives that focused leaders must accomplish in the modern business arena. Later on we'll see how a **social discovery** process can help you meet these objectives.

**Job one** of a focused leader is **clarity**. Ambiguity from leadership takes a tremendous toll on everyone in an organization, as I discovered in guiding several companies through difficult turnarounds. The quicker we can clearly identify the pains and pleasures of our customers, the essence of our products, the nuances of our culture, and hundreds, if not thousands of other aspects of our business, the better the outcome for our shareholders. So often we jump to the self-aggrandizing and superficially exciting aspects of leadership, like building a strategy, before we have taken the time to develop a true understanding of all

the vital areas of the business that will be needed to carry out that strategy. Too many companies lack clarity across all **9Lenses**, and meanwhile they are working like mad to come up with one new strategy after another. As it's often said, the definition of insanity is repeating the same action and expecting a different outcome. What sanity is to a person, clarity is to a business. No matter what position we occupy within the company, we have the opportunity to lead with clarity. Whether we are in sales, marketing, finance, support, development, or some other department, we are all leaders. The process we lead connects with other processes. Take one process, do it well, and whether you work in a small, medium, or large enterprise, it usually doesn't take long for someone to give you two processes the next time. But making even just one process go smoothly is tough, and requires clarity.

**Job two** of a focused leader is fostering **enthusiasm, collective learning, and teamwork**. Two heads are better than one, and 200 are better than two. Outside consultants can provide useful insights into problems and solutions, but in my experience "inside consultants" often provide better ones, and you're already paying them! Getting everyone involved also pays further dividends over time because it builds trust. If we have clarity and we don't need to expend all of our energy proving to ourselves and others how smart we are, we can do something genuinely smart and take an inside out approach to management. The more engaged all of the stakeholders of an organization are, the easier it is to maintain clarity.

**Job three** of a focused leader is shaping **alignment**. If we think of clarity as the soil and collective engagement as the seed, alignment is the stem or trunk. Many leaders, especially the ones eager to prove something (like inexperienced CEOs), try to shape alignment too early, before the seed has sprouted up out of the soil, or before they're certain what sort of "plant" they're dealing with. Someone who's just taken over a sales

team could force everyone to align around their thoughts since they now “own” the customer in the sales process. But pulling and tugging are less efficient than collaborating with the team and meeting the customer’s needs. Indeed in the case of a really difficult problem, just like a knot, the harder we tug on it the tighter it becomes. I’ve certainly been guilty of skipping straight to job three well before I should have and pulling a knot tighter. Like most overachievers, I thought I had all the answers. But I didn’t even know the questions, and I was alienating the people who were my best assets for formulating them, or nudging them into unproductive groupthink. Nowadays when I scan other people’s businesses through the **9Lenses** platform, I discover similar gaps in alignment, particularly between executives and process leaders. Most companies lack a common understanding of key items like their market segmentation and ranking, or their gross margins.

**Job four** of a focused leader is devising an **intelligent and measurable strategy**. Alignment is not uniformity. It means we’re all working toward a common goal, but it doesn’t mean we’re all doing the same thing in the same way. That’s why I think of strategy as the leaves; they need to tilt and spread in many different directions even though they all lead back to the same upright stem and are nurtured by the same soil. As I’ve said several times already, and as I’ll say throughout this book because I think it’s important, strategy creation in a business is too often premature and lacks intelligence. Too many strategy meetings are like a camping trip where nobody has bothered to find out what supplies are needed, what the capabilities and limitations of the campers are, what the weather forecast is, or even where the campsite is on a map. When I was a kid, that was the kind of trip that had us all saying, “are we there yet?” How can we be sure even when we get somewhere that we really are there? I wasn’t enough of a skeptic yet to ask the more difficult question, the one about measurement. One



of my employees related a similar story about going on a camping trip in what turned out to be a torrential rainstorm. It was supposed to be warm, so they didn't even have real tents, just a few tarps and spools of string. Half of the boys on the trip had never even been camping before. Nobody had the medical training to diagnose hypothermia, which turned out to be quite relevant on that particular weekend. It might have been a good idea for a camping trip, but try believing that when you're soaked and shivering. In business terms, it's easy to fall in love with a **strategy** that is actually based on a superficial understanding of our **market, people, and financial assets**, our **operations** and **execution processes**, and our **expectation, governance, and entity structures**. Strategy isn't the master lens, and it needs to carefully consider the other eight.

**Job five** of a focused leader is to create **accountability, ownership, and empowerment**. This is the fruit of the tree. It's sweet, it's delicate, and a lot has to go right for it to come to bear. It's also where the new seeds are contained. When everyone experiences the sweet taste of success and feels they contributed to it, we gain positive momentum as an organization and we are better positioned for more success. Even with that terrible camping trip, if we had gone to the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong supplies, we could probably still have made a much better go of it if we'd simply had more experience working together and succeeding together in similar circumstances. When we fail to complete the first four jobs of a focused leader effectively, our customers may hand us back the product and say, "This is not what we wanted." The first person they'll call is the leader of the sales process. If the leader of the sales process cannot refund their purchase, they'll call her boss. And so on. It's ironic; the less you empower your subordinates, the more responsibility you assume for their failure. Unfortunately, we've all been there—I certainly have and I did not like the experience. We want all of our stakeholders to feel like owners. A sense of

ownership creates responsibility and accountability. It fosters the collaboration, teamwork, and flexibility needed to thrive within an uncertain and complex environment. In sum, it avoids the OPM phenomenon—the carelessness we can all have with “other people’s money.”

## A FOCUSED LEADER...

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Drives **clarity**

Foster enthusiasms, **collective learning**, and teamwork

Shapes **alignment**

Devises **intelligent** and measurable **strategy**

Creates **accountability**, ownership, and **empowerment**

## THE FIVE BARRIERS TO BECOMING A FOCUSED LEADER

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We all have our limitations. Of course these are somewhat different for each person, but over time I’ve noticed some patterns that apply to almost everyone. As you will see these patterns are also overlapping and interconnected. The **first barrier** is that **we tend to stick to what we know**. If we are technology experts, then this is the first group we’ll meet with when we take over a business. If we feel at home with numbers, we tend to gravitate to the financial or operational aspects of the business. We build our understanding of the whole from this one **lens**. Having an area of expertise is not a bad thing per se, but it can lead us to miss other important areas that are vital to our success, or to micromanage the team in our area of expertise. Because of my background, I always have to restrain myself from getting too directly involved with sales and marketing.

This disciplinary tunneling leads to a **second barrier** because over time it tends to make our business experience homogeneous. **We can only act on what we observe**, and our predispositions limit what we observe. In this sense our experience can work against us. But how can we see what we don't see? This sounds impossible, but in reality it's merely uncomfortable; it means we must stretch ourselves to those areas where we have less experience, or where we have less natural aptitude. This is why I stress the need to attend to all nine **lenses** as well as the need to empower collective learning so that we don't take this entire burden onto our own shoulders.

Just as we don't see what we don't see, **we don't know what we don't know**. This is the **third barrier** to becoming a focused leader: pride. And pride is really another name for insecurity. We all face situations from time to time in which we are confronted with our lack of knowledge, but too often we become defensive and fail to appreciate these as learning opportunities. My wife, over the years, has certainly made it clear to me that there are a lot of things I don't know. Whatever she doesn't point out, my kids are quite eager to. Unfortunately we don't benefit from this same unconditional honesty in our work lives that we do in our family lives. Our employees don't want to tell us we're wrong because they think that we don't really want to hear it. And a lot of times we don't. Likewise, we will rarely admit to our own superiors if we're stuck. We'll try to dig our way out even if we're digging deeper. But good leadership requires that we seek out experiences that humble us, rather than shy away from them or pretend to ourselves and to others that we have nothing to learn.

The **fourth barrier** to being a focused leader is that **we tend to value our own daily work more than that of others**. This is partly a result of the disciplinary tunneling I described earlier. For instance, most sales people think marketing is an easy task, though they may keep this to themselves. They

figure marketing is simply creating promotions or slicks, and when they can't close a new prospect that marketing sends them, they assume it's simply a bad prospect and therefore marketing's fault. If they were in marketing, they would surely do better. Meanwhile the marketing folks think the sales team has the easiest job in the world. All they have to do is sign the leads that marketing attracts. They spend the whole day chatting and then get a great big check for their troubles. But they don't notice that the sales team is staying until midnight on the last day of the month fighting for the company's livelihood while everyone else has already gone home hours before. And neither sales nor marketing properly appreciate the various support services that make their jobs possible. Furthermore, even if we look past this turf factor, the psychological literature tells us that we tend to overestimate our own quantity of contribution and underestimate that of others. Perhaps this is simply because we know everything that went into our work, every carefully considered decision, every little detail, and every ounce of effort. We've walked a mile in our shoes, not in someone else's.

It gets worse—the **fifth and last barrier** for business leaders is that **many of us just nod up and down when we don't understand something**. This isn't quite the same as what I described earlier as pride. It's more like a fear of embarrassment. I remember being in graduate school and attending the mathematics primer and just writing in my notebook and nodding up and down. I didn't understand much of what the professor was writing on the board. I reasoned that someone else had to understand this content, and if I just found that person at the end of the day and had him explain it to me, I'd be fine. Unfortunately, there were other students in the class who were having the same thought. Many of us were too embarrassed to brush up on math in a class that was specifically designed for us to do nothing but.

And that's just a classroom scenario. How many of us would have the courage to ask our CEO to stop and explain something we didn't understand? We may expect everyone else around us to know better, but maybe they don't. Maybe the basis of your misunderstanding is actually a mistake that could cost the business a great deal if someone doesn't point it out. Or suppose you are that CEO, or perhaps a department or project head. All day long you drop in on various conversations that your team is having. If you lack the specific knowledge and skills to follow a conversation that isn't in your "wheelhouse," are you comfortable exposing your ignorance and asking simple questions that probe to the heart of the matter? Or are you just going to nod your head up and down and pretend to understand when your team needs big picture leadership? Some of the greatest intellectuals the world has ever known led mainly by asking questions, very often questions about problems they freely admitted they did not have the answers for. The greatest tragedy in business management is to be sitting in a room full of very smart, very dedicated people who are all nodding their head up and down, but nobody has the first clue what the conversation is really about. The chief is nodding because he's afraid of undermining his leadership credibility, and all the others are nodding because they're afraid of looking bad in front of the chief. Together these smart and dedicated people will collaborate to make terrible decisions, when everything they need to make good decisions is right there in front of them. We've all seen it happen; Jerry Harvey calls this the "Abilene paradox" in his book of the same name. Psychologists call it "pluralistic ignorance." It is my sincere hope that the **9Lenses** system can be a tool that helps businesses avert this tragedy.

## BARRIERS FOR THE FOCUSED LEADER...

**Sticking** with what we know

**Acting** only on what we observe

**Not knowing** what we don't know

**Valuing** our own daily work more than that of others

**Nodding** up and down when we don't understand

## ACADEMIC RATIONALE FOR USING A COMPREHENSIVE SET OF CONNECTED LENSES

The **9Lenses** spring from my own business experience, and I initially developed them as a way to solve practical dilemmas I was confronting on a day to day basis. But over time, I've started to notice that my thinking runs parallel to what I've encountered elsewhere, especially in the academic domain. Consider, for instance, the systems dynamics simulation model developed by John Sterman, an MIT professor and one of our leading economic thinkers. Sterman postulates that the crucial generator of booms and busts in simple commodity market cycles is a mismatch between supply and demand. He then offers three critical buffers against supply and demand mismatches that all managers can control:

01. Current inventory (widgets we have)
02. Immediate production capacity (more widgets now!)
03. Long-term production capacity (way more widgets eventually)

In Sterman's model, all three buffers produce structured feedback loops with differing speeds of adjustment. This has formed the basis for later work in which he discusses the general relationships between economic phenomena, decision-making, and sustainability; you may be familiar with his creation of "management flight simulators" in his consulting work. In summary, Sterman concludes that our individual minds are simply not wired for making real-time decisions in non-linear environments. This is a fascinating conclusion, but also a somewhat disturbing one. The world always has been and always will be fundamentally non-linear, but in earlier phases of capitalism we were able to isolate certain variables or at least slow them down to the point where we could model them linearly and therefore make fairly reasonable judgments. This was possible because there were buffers in the market environment itself, buffers caused by the inefficiency of transporting materials and communicating information, buffers in the absence of many potential market participants. These buffers no longer exist. Our business environment is increasingly rapid, complex, non-linear, and interconnected. And even when we move from an interval of seconds to longer intervals of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and fiscal quarters, decision-making actually becomes more difficult now rather than less so, because unpredictable change leads to even greater non-linearity and therefore an accumulation of error in our models. So it is not possible to slow down even if we might like to.

Sterman's research is rather densely mathematical, but it converges nicely with what we are learning these days from behavioral economists like Eric Beinhocker (*The Origin of Wealth*) and from other social scientists who study cognitive bias. In this domain I've become particularly interested in the ideas of Jon Elster, a Sorbonne trained philosopher who now teaches in the political science department at Columbia. Elster has identified the six most common types of bias in our daily mental lives, each of which impacts our thoughts, reactions, inclinations, and decisions in subtle but powerful ways.

- **Framing Bias:** As social, practical creatures our minds are more attuned to context than content. Thus an 80% retention seems more acceptable to most people than a 20% loss, even though they are mathematically identical.
- **Representativeness:** We have a bad habit of drawing big conclusions from very small and possibly flawed samples of information.
- **Availability Bias:** We tend to make decisions based on data that is easily accessed instead of finding the most pertinent data needed to make a good decision.
- **Superstitious Reasoning:** We often confuse random chance with cause and effect.
- **Risk Judgment:** Most of us have a tough time calculating probabilities and matching them to outcome payoffs, leading us to be too timid or too aggressive.
- **Mental Accounting:** We all tend to place money into varying mental compartments with a lack of rational thought about the return on investment or cost when truly comparing these compartments.

Taking these and other biases into account, Elster concludes that, “only the clinically depressed can make unbiased cognitive assessments.” After I read this, I immediately went off all my medications. Just kidding! But I do think that quip of his is pretty funny, and pretty apt. The worst mistake we can make is believing in our own infallibility.



# MOUNTING COMPLEXITY

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Taken together, Sterman and Elster paint the picture of a linear mind struggling to operate in a non-linear world. David Pearce Snyder, who lists “consulting futurist” among his many colorful job titles, has coined the term “complexipacity” to describe this predicament. Complexipacity (see *Figure 07*), he explains, is “a person’s or organization’s threshold for assimilating or addressing complex ideas, systems, problems, situations, [and] interactions.” As the world becomes more and more complex, our complexipacity is still bounded by our natural cognitive limits. And many of the solutions we try for complexity just make things worse. In the business domain, there is so much content coming at us today that it makes our heads swim. Good content and bad content, new ideas, new models, and new approaches. Case in point—I have to thank another consulting futurist named Edie Weiner for alerting me to Snyder’s books. It’s easy to miss a good idea as so many of them whiz by us. To cite one simple index of this accumulation of content, the MIT Sloan School has recently initiated a new Master’s program in finance because they think the field has become too complex for the standard MBA. It seems like sooner or later we’re all going to need a Ph.D. just to tie our shoelaces. How can we assimilate all of this content, let alone interpret it and apply it in our practical decision-making processes?

Our confusion about this question is often reflected in our own managerial practices. For instance, many of the CEOs I meet have heard about, read about, and tried to implement Kaplan and Norton’s *Balanced Scorecard* at their businesses. Usually the CEO will attend a seminar, read the book, assign her team to read the book, and set up an offsite planning session. At the offsite, the leadership team lays the foundation for the Balanced Scorecard, and then the company begins to implement a new organizational strategy map on the basis of those results.

## COMPLICATED

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- **Closed** System
- **Linear**
- **Fixed** Elements
- **Constrained** Dynamics *Example: the internal combustion engine*

## COMPLEX

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- **Open** System
- **Non-linear**
- **Unconstrained** dynamics that are subject to externalities which can cause rapid transformational change or chaos;
- **They** are stable and coherent only as long as their multiple components are in equilibrium
- **Cannot** be predicted with reliability: they involve potentially infinite variables, links and feedback loops: risk is certain
- **If human factors** are in any way involved the risks become more uncertain
- **They are subject to emergence** (novelties which cause mutations) and ambiguity

Now *Balanced Scorecard* is a great book, but this approach for using the book is dangerous because it looks for a magic bullet solution and leaves all of the other knowledge that exists at the company lying completely inert. It doesn't do anything to expand

our team's complexipacity and in fact just adds one more set of variables for them to worry about. In all likelihood they're not asked to critique the book or to draw connections to other ideas or books they might have encountered recently. Odds are someone at the offsite has read Kim and Mauborgne's *Blue Ocean Strategy* (maybe to prepare for an offsite retreat at his last company). There are a lot of interesting connections between these books. But 'hyperlinking' in the library of business theory is rare, and we generally have to do it for ourselves. We all have a thirst for knowledge, but that thirst is really a thirst to connect this knowledge to what we already know and apply it to what matters to us most. I hope this book and the accompanying software platform can help you do just that—make all content you read social, actionable and connected.

## BACK TO JOB ONE—CLARITY

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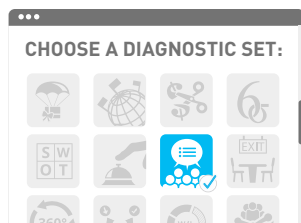
As a hired CEO on four different occasions, in both public and private enterprises, I've learned that the only way to tackle complexity is through **clarity**. But as I've explained in this chapter, clarity turns out to be another name for inclusiveness and intellectual humility rather than some mystical vision a leader has that leads to a stirring rah-rah speech. It means getting out of our own way, acknowledging our biases and our fallibility, celebrating non-linearity and interconnectedness (instead of fearing them), and encouraging genuine collaboration. Indeed the complexipacity equation changes completely when we think about many minds working together instead of just one working separately. I saw an amazing nature video the other day that showed researchers creating a cast model of an entire ant colony by pumping in diluted concrete. It took almost a week, and then another day for it to set. Taking relative scale into account, it turns out the ants had built a

city roughly the size of the Great Wall of China and similar in architectural sophistication to classical Rome. I don't know about you, but I feel like I'm smarter than an ant. So what happens when we apply this same kind of social multiplier to the human "colonies" at our workplaces? What could we build? **9Lenses** is a way to leverage the power of our natural social process to generate an organic, multi-dimensional view of an organization that can evolve with growth and as you encounter new challenges. But don't start nodding your heads up and down just yet. There's a lot more for me to show you first.



# ORGANIZATIONAL INTELLIGENCE SOFTWARE

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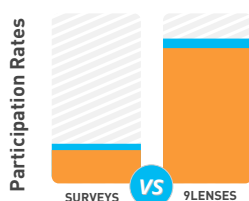
## Uncover Uncommon Insights

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