

Title: “Peripheral Vision: Detecting the Weak Signals That Will Make or Break Your Company”

Authors: George S. Day, Paul J.H. Schoemaker

Publisher: Harvard Business School Press

Publication Date: 2006

Length: 248 pages

Reading time: 7 hours

Reading rating: 4 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating 4 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

How is it possible for any size business to adapt and grow in our current environment of rapid global change? Competition can come from anywhere. We are bombarded with far more information than we can digest and interpret. Strategic focus loosens out to the more common, and manageable, focus on short term profits. We want to stay ahead of our competition but it often seems like an overwhelming job.

When the authors asked 140 corporate strategists how many times have you been surprised by high impact events in the last five years, they discovered that two-thirds admitted their organizations had been surprised by as many as three high-impact events in the past five years.

Peripheral vision is generally defined as a part of vision that occurs outside the very center of our gaze. With this book, authors Day and Schoemaker apply that term to an organization’s need for a powerful lens for understanding the complex and often confusing fuzzy zone at the edge of an organization. The authors found that fewer than twenty percent of firms have developed their peripheral vision enough to stay ahead of their rivals. When the capacity for peripheral vision does not meet the organization’s need, there is a vigilance gap. This book addresses how managers and their organizations can build a superior capacity to recognize and act on weak signals from the periphery before it is too late

The strength of this book is its practicality. Day and Shoemaker present a framework that is both comprehensive and practical. They argue that good peripheral vision is knowing where to look more carefully, knowing how to interpret these weak signals and knowing how to act when the signals are still ambiguous.

Chapters in the book are organized around their seven-step framework to bridge the vigilance gap. Each of the chapters includes a rich set of case studies ranging from the BBC to Barbie dolls. The first five steps focus on improving the process of peripheral vision. The last two steps focus on building broader organizational capabilities and leadership to support peripheral vision

Step 1: Scoping: where to look

Step 2: Scanning: how to look

Step 3: Interpreting: what the data mean

Step 4: Probing: what to explore more closely

Step 5: Acting: what to do with these insights  
Step 6: Organizing: how to develop vigilance  
Step 7: Leading: an agenda for action

The book also includes a toolkit for self-diagnosis. The Strategic Eye Exam is designed to help management teams better understand what is meant by peripheral vision as well as assess the gap between an organization's need for peripheral vision and its ability to sense weak signals from its environment. The Strategic Eye Exam can be completed by an individual or team in organizations of any size.

The authors candidly admit that the signal to noise ratio in peripheral vision is difficult to penetrate. Developing peripheral vision cannot be reduced to a checklist. Your approach by definition must be non-linear. Day and Schoemaker caution that peripheral vision "requires practice, dedication and seasoned judgment. Understanding the periphery is not so much about following a formula as it is about asking the right questions and reflecting on them appropriately."

To learn more about the approach of these distinguished authors before you buy the book, you can check out an electronic copy of the tool kit, made available by Decision Strategies International, where Paul Schoemaker is founder and chairman (<http://www.thinkdsi.com>). Another rich electronic resource is the Knowledge@Wharton website (<http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu>). Select Podcasts and then select Marketing, you will be able to listen to George Day being interviewed about the book or view a transcript of that interview. George Day is Professor of Marketing and Co-director of the Mack Center for Technological Innovation at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. You will need to provide an email address and password but the registration process is quick and the material on the site is well worth the effort.

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