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## Executive Book Summaries®

# Thirteeners

## Why Only 13 Percent of Companies Successfully Execute Their Strategy – and How Yours Can Be One of Them

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

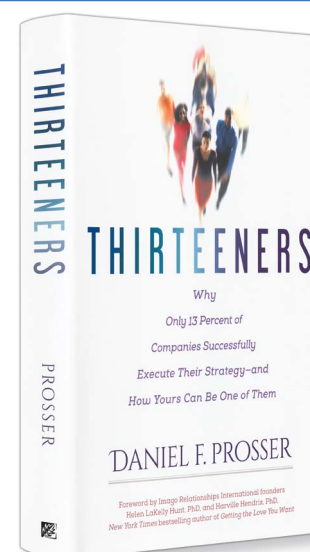
In today's corporate world, 87 percent of companies fail to successfully execute the strategy they set for a given year. CEO mentor and coach Dan Prosser shows you how to make your company one of the other 13 percent — a Thirteener. In the process, he explains that the true challenge of building a great company — one that consistently executes its strategy — is understanding the real nature of human interaction and the key to success: connectedness.

Whether you're a successful CEO, business owner, entrepreneur or leader, or whether you're struggling to build the business you've always wanted, *Thirteeners* will help you transform your organization's internal connectedness so you can achieve the next level of performance you're looking for, create a workplace environment that supports your vision and assures participation by every team member, and produce breakthrough results.

With a focus on business as a network of interrelated conversations and through groundbreaking "Best Place To Work" company research, Prosser demonstrates what you need to do to transform the way your employees think and act, to achieve unprecedented levels of performance for your company.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why conversations control everything in your business.
- The 10 conversations that create a connected organization.
- How the Execution Virus can infect your business and how the vaccine of truth can heal it.
- Key concepts of the Breakthrough Solutions Framework.



by Daniel F. Prosser

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THIRTEENERS

by Daniel F. Prosser

**The author:** Daniel Prosser, as CEO of The Prosser Group, has over 40 years of experience as an entrepreneur CEO, speaker, teacher and mentor, coaching business leaders, entrepreneurs and micropreneurs to cultivate an uncommon approach to building an extraordinary competitive edge.

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## SECTION I: CONNECTEDNESS AND CONVERSATIONS

### How to Invent the Impossible

Amazing things happen when you are willing to declare the impossible to be possible — without any idea how you're going to make it so. Everything is a function of the types of conversations you engage in. And the conversations that create every dimension of your life are the conversations that cause your business to succeed or fail.

Before your business came into existence, there was a founding conversation, and today you continue to manage your business with conversations. And while conversations appear to happen one at a time, in fact they rarely exist as singular entities. Our day-to-day interactions are made up of interconnecting conversations. Business is a network of interrelated conversations.

There are conversations you are aware of and others you are unaware of and, as a result, pay little or no attention to. Yet those unacknowledged conversations undermine and sabotage your business; they act like a virus that infects your vision, your mission and the strategy you're trying to execute right now.

Conversations have within them the ultimate power to make things be the way you say they're going to be. Creating an awareness of conversations is one of the biggest challenges in your life and your business. ●

### The Conversation in Which You 'Say How'

Here is an example to help you understand how the power of words — the conversation — determines the outcome.

The *Summit Daily News* reported two Summit County snowboarders rode away with \$3,600 in cash as the grand-prize team winners of the "Challenge" at the Keystone ski resort. Prophetically, 26-year-old Nick Gearhart and 25-year-old Bill Pomeroy had named their team "The Team That Just Won \$3,600."

Nick and Bill had an outrageous plan to compete for the chance to split \$3,600, and they actually had the courage to declare the outcome of the event weeks before it would take place. How overconfident is that?

In effect, what Nick and Bill did that day was to put a stake in the ground and declare a future outcome — a conversation they put into their team name. They decided to forget about playing it safe by looking good in front of their buddies and instead took an extraordinary risk to have something they were committed to. They were determined to say how it was going to be.

They knew they had work ahead of them, but the die was cast, and the only thing left was to follow through on what they had given their word to do — close the gap between their words and reality.

These two snowboarders had invented the most powerful conversation — a conversation to shape the future. The key to their success was their declaration of the final outcome.

Outcomes only become possible when you are willing to declare it to be possible — with absolutely no evidence that it is — and then take the actions that are missing and that are consistent with your commitment. Your words only gain power the moment you are willing to say *how* it is going to be and then take the actions to have it be that way.

When you change your language, the words you choose literally change your perspective. And when you



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change your perspective, you change what is possible in your future.

Begin to *say how*: Right now, state your desired outcomes for your business, your customers and your employees as if those outcomes already exist. If you change the way you look at your business, the business you're looking at will change. Just by changing where you're standing, you will begin to see things that weren't visible and available to you before. ●

## The Connection Points

For you to gain the best results in your workplace, you will need to become consciously aware of the network of conversations in your organization that impacts your employees' ability to connect and perform.

If your organization is fully connected, power can flow through the entire network of conversations. If not, the network will cease to operate, like an electrical device with a short circuit. In the workplace, a lack of connectedness prevents the organization from creating and utilizing the power it needs to achieve its strategic plan. Even worse, the wrong connections can destroy the enterprise's ability to function properly. Connectedness that makes the network work; this is the physics of your organization.

### What Is Connectedness?

Who you are as an organization is largely determined by how you connect with people, both internally and externally. But how do you experience the reality of connectedness?

The psychiatrist Dr. Edward M. Hallowell offers the following distinction: “[Connectedness] is a sense of being a part of something larger than oneself. It is a sense of belonging, or a sense of accompaniment. It is that feeling in your bones that you are not alone. It is a sense that, no matter how scary things may become, there is a hand for you in the dark. While ambition drives us to achieve, connectedness is my word for the force that urges us to ally, to affiliate, to enter into mutual relationships, to take strength and to grow through cooperative behavior.”

While there are a multitude of hidden, disconnecting conversations that serve to sabotage company performance, there are just a handful of connecting conversations. The ability to manage these conversations between employees and managers is the best indicator of a great workplace with a culture of high performance. They shape the way people connect and help the organization produce breakthrough results. These 10 conversations are for — not about — Contribution, Acknowledgment and

Appreciation, Alignment, Accountability, Communication, Relatedness, Responsibility, Integrity, Possibility, and Fun, Rewards, Gratitude. ●

## SECTION II: VIRUSES AND DISCONNECTORS

### What an Execution Virus Is and How It Infects and Disconnects Your Business

A meme is a unit of transmission of cultural ideas, symbols or practices. It facilitates the spread of such things from person to person through writing, speech, gestures, rituals and so on. Meme theorists look upon memes as analogous to a culture's genes in that they self-replicate, mutate and respond to selective pressures. It's also critically important to note that some memes may replicate themselves and spread even when they prove harmful to their hosts.

The application of meme theory to the workplace is fascinating because just as a species' genetic code plays a role in its survival or extinction, memes — the genetic code of the workplace — play a role in the survival or failure of your organization. In the workplace, limiting memes exist through a system of hidden conversations that affect which information is created, interpreted and disseminated. These memes form what is called the Execution Virus. A conversation that has become a viral meme in a company is an Execution Virus. Hidden, viral conversations cause employees to become disconnected from their company's mission and purpose, thus producing poor results.

Here are the 10 conversations that always obstruct performance:

- “It's not our strategy.”
- “They don't appreciate us.”
- “They're always making excuses.”
- “Did you hear what (Team Member A) said about (Team Member B)?”
- “What mission statement...and why should I care?”
- “They treat us like shit.”
- “It's the same old story.”
- “Because he's (or she's) the boss. That's why.”
- “We've always done it this way.”
- “The boss is watching, so just don't screw up.”

Before you as the leader of the company can address that problem, you must first discover what is causing

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employees to feel powerless. Looking in the mirror and finding out what you're doing to cause your company to become disconnected and infected with an Execution Virus is the first step to replacing the Execution Virus with a new meme that creates a connected, successful company. ●

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### To Fix Your Disconnected Company, Look in the Mirror

Any transformative initiative in a company demands that the key leaders of the company be willing to examine their own behavior first. Only then can they start helping those who work for them formulate a better approach to executing company strategy.

In thousands of companies, the boss considers him- or herself to be above the employees and therefore entitled to behave in any way he or she sees fit, regardless of the impact. That attitude of “you are here to serve me” reduces the employees to doing only one thing well: working hard to avoid upsetting the boss. Such behavior creates a major disconnect between the employees who have to endure it and the strategy that the employers want to execute. No employee thinks about how best to support the company's strategy when the focus is on surviving in a toxic workplace.

This kind of disconnected company is called a “looking-glass company” for two reasons: If the leaders of the company would look in the mirror, they would see the source of the majority of their company's problems. And employees reflect the thinking and behavior of their leaders. The leaders in these businesses refuse to examine themselves and their own behavior as the source of their organization's poor performance. As a result, they will likely never achieve their full potential.

A rudderless and drifting organization like a looking-glass company isn't *for* anything. It's *about* the owner. It rarely takes into consideration anyone but the founder or anything other than the founder's ego and financial needs. ●

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### Isolate the Execution Virus and Apply the Vaccine of Truth

Memes will not be visible until you (not anybody else) expose them and you (not anybody else) reveal the truth about them and their impact on you and your employees' vision, awareness, connectedness and accountability — the critical components of the complex evolving system that is your company.

What vaccine can you give your organization to help it build a resistance to viral memes? The positive meme that acts as a vaccine against all the negative memes is the truth. Not just any truth, but the truth about your company's past performance and the exposure of any secrets, past and present. This truth needs to cover your most outrageous stories of success, your fabrications, your transgressions against and conduct toward others, and the business secrets that you think your employees don't know (although they most likely do).

Though a negative, limiting meme can never be removed, it can be replaced with a positive meme through the following four-step process:

- Tell the truth about your past — good and bad.
- Identify the limiting and negative viral conversation — the meme — that represents your employees' interpretation of all past failures.
- Declare a positive future — a newly invented positive meme — to take the place of the negative viral meme. This is the truth of who you are, and it results in a powerful stand for the possibility of your shared future.
- Adopt a system to keep the positive meme active and replicating throughout your organization.

### Are You Leading or Just Pretending?

Ask yourself this fundamental question: “Am I truly committed to cultivating who I am as a leader for the future, or am I more interested in — and committed to — reinforcing the chronic pretense of my leadership and expecting everyone else to make the changes needed?” That question may seem harsh or cynical, but most organizations today aren't going to survive the next five years unless their leaders realize that it's *their* thinking and *their* behavior that most stands in the way of their organization's success.

Leadership is about stepping out of your comfort zone — getting out of the box — and the irony is that the instructions for getting out of the box are outside the box. Until you recognize that your true value as a leader is in your ability to lead an inquiry into the solutions for your organization (and not try to provide all the answers), you are doomed to repeat your own bad decisions and those of others who came before you. A more powerful future is infinitely possible, but to own it, you must be willing to give up the pretense that as a leader, you always need to know the answers. Instead, you must begin to learn how to ask the right questions. ●

## SECTION III: HERE BE DRAGONS

### Stepping Out of Your Comfort Zone

Now it's time to take the second step: getting both feet out of your comfort zone and into the unknown.

Most people are invested in not failing, and they've taught all their employees to value that course over taking any kind of risks that have the potential to pay off. Everyone's doing it, and it's costing them on a grand scale. The leading causes of failure to execute business strategy are (a) the unwillingness of business leaders and their followers to change their thinking from "avoiding failure" to "standing for something that seems to be impossible to achieve" and (b) the invention of conversations that support that avoidance-of-failure thinking.

All business strategies fall into two basic categories:

**Rower Strategy:** Operating from the past or reacting in ways that are based on fear of failure, like someone who's working hard but getting nowhere fast because he's rowing upstream, trying to get away from the dangerous rapids downstream. And he's all by himself in the boat.

**Grower Strategy:** Focusing on building and generating from a perspective of the future — a view that is declared by saying how it's going to be. A Grower Strategy is about inventing something from nothing. That means if you think you already have the answer to your strategy-execution issues, you are stuck in Rower Strategy, and the Execution Virus is determining your future. Instead you need to be investigating what's possible at all times. Grower Strategy is not about your knowing the answers — it's about discovering the future you want.

#### Chaos: The Great Transformer

The fundamental reason why so many leaders don't lead their teams to the finish line in executing their strategy is that they can't tolerate the discomfort that comes with the chaos when things aren't happening as planned. Chaos is not an issue most organizations are keen to address; it's easier to address the crisis of the moment than to address the feeling of disequilibrium that comes along with the feeling of chaos.

The biggest mistake business leaders make in chaotic situations is rushing to judgment. They try to make sense of the situation and then immediately react. Unfortunately, the first decisions made in incidents like this tend to

be the worst decisions. They are the ones leaders have to make amends for later.

If you want to create an organization of innovation and creativity, you need to allow and even introduce the tension that comes with or causes chaos. Noted scientists G. Nicolis and I. Prigogine have shown that when a physical system is pushed away from equilibrium (in balance, symmetry and stability), it survives and thrives, while if it remains at equilibrium, it dies. Systems that are out of equilibrium are forced to explore their space of possibilities, and this leads to new patterns of relationships and structures. An organization that embraces chaos is healthier than one that hangs on to equilibrium, and it can achieve a new level of performance. ●

### The Breakthrough Solutions Framework for Your Business

Transformation is the process by which you completely reinvent your thinking, your actions and who you are. It's like the process of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. A butterfly is not a better or more improved caterpillar; it's an entirely different animal that has undergone a transformation.

The fastest way through the transformation process in your business is to adopt the three foundational concepts of the Breakthrough Solutions Framework (BSF) for altering the way you relate to your business future. Think of them as the legs of a stool you can calmly sit on in the middle of chaos so that you can see what you need to do to start transforming your organization.

**BSF Concept #1:** Perspective is everything. To transform your company, transform your perspective of it and your view of its place in the world.

**BSF Concept #2:** Business is a conversation given to you by the view you have of your business, driven by your relationship to circumstances and the experience of chaos you so detest. So, accept that you can't avoid the circumstances your business faces, and so instead, you need to change your relationship to them.

**BSF Concept #3:** All actions and results in business are determined by memes, which are specific conversations that get created internally and can either undermine and sabotage your intentions or connect your company so that it can execute your strategy. ●

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## SECTION IV: THE BLUEPRINT FOR BUILDING A THIRTEENER COMPANY

### Get Set: Setting the Stage for Your Transformation

If you look at how a house is built, there's a blueprint that provides the layout or the primary instructions for building the framework of the house. Once the framework is established, you then put on your choice of a roof, doors, windows and walls. Then you can decorate it and move in. The Breakthrough Solutions Framework serves essentially the same function, yet the framework gives the flexibility to modify the final creation or outcome. It's like putting on a different roof, doors, windows and so forth each time.

The Breakthrough Solutions Framework was developed around five things that are missing (singly or combined) in almost every organization: vision, awareness, strategy, accountability and a culture of connectedness.

#### The ConnectionPoints Promise-Based Strategy and Execution Management Process

This process can be broken into four stages in this order:

**Breakthrough Vision:** Declare a seemingly impossible future for you and your business to achieve.

**Revelation in Awareness:** Disconnect your new future from your past results and judgments.

**Breakthrough Strategy:** Uncover the execution gaps that need to be closed to produce results.

**Breakthrough Accountability:** Execute: Establish an accountability system to support you in executing your strategy and making sure all your planning doesn't disappear over time, as your old ways of thinking try to take back over.

Upon completion of the four-step process, the organization then moves into a fifth stage of building and sustaining connectedness, using the ConnectionPoints.

**Culture of Connectedness:** Contribution, acknowledgment, alignment, accountability, communication, relatedness, responsibility, integrity, possibility and fun/rewards/gratitude. ●

### Stage One: Declare Your Future

It is said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step, but let's go above and beyond here and give you the first four steps.

**Step One: Break with the past.** The first step in the ConnectionPoints process is to make a complete break with the past, and the only way to do that effectively is to acknowledge what happened in the past and tell the truth about it — the good, the bad and the ugly. When you ask your team members to describe five or six events from the past year that boosted their spirits or that they are proud of, they are immediately disarmed. They expected you to start your planning by launching into what's wrong with performance and, by association, what's wrong with them. Do the opposite by leading off with the good, and that will set the tone as you work together on aligning on your new future. It will help you deal with the bad and the ugly in due course.

**Step Two: Declare and map your future.** Declaring and mapping your future is the first step in shaping what is not already (nothingness) into what is desired (somethingness). Mapping the future is about the design of ideals, principles and values. It's these factors that determine how people will view you in the future — and how you will view yourself. By itself, a map of the future is just words. But when you take those words and create your impossible vision for the future, you will have a powerful platform to launch any project and produce any outcome you desire.

**Steps Three and Four: Declare what is ultimately possible in that future, and identify the overall outcomes you are committed to.** So, what future would you be willing to have? Even if you can't actually see yourself there, where would "there" be? Swing out and think big. Thinking is free. Can you imagine something that your mind actively resists envisioning? Listen to yourself, because that is the future you want to create.

When you say to yourself, "Oh, I can't do something like that," then you know you're on the right track! Perhaps you're being held back by a concern for what others would think of you for envisioning this future. "Can't" is not a word for this work. ●

### Stage Two: Disconnect from Your Past

In Stage Two, you begin to venture into your past so you can tell the truth about it and — most important — release your attachment to it. The fear of repeating the past runs the lives of almost all business leaders, and it explains why you don't have the results you want. If you're unwilling to let go of your past, then that's what you're going to have to settle for.

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But creating a future is a lot simpler than your past would mislead you to believe. The negative viral memes that make up the Execution Virus in your workplace are a reflection of your past. If only you were saying those memes out loud rather than being unconscious of them, they would have no control over you and the execution of your strategy. Exposure of your memes is the most essential part of the process of disconnecting from your past so it won't dominate your future.

Right now, you might want to make this your mantra: "There is no past. There are only the conversations I have about the past that dominate my actions and thwart the future I say I want." Once you're completed Stage Two, you will have your power back. ●

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### Stage Three: Mind Your Gap

Reverse salient is a military term. It refers to a backward bulge in the advancing line of a military front. If the enemy establishes a stronghold and is able to push part of an advancing front backward into itself, it creates a reverse salient.

In business, reverse salients are the weaknesses in the systems we operate within, and more important, they are where opportunities are located. Without identifying the reverse salients, many innovators in business would not have been able to see where to focus their efforts to create the amazing world we live in.

Identify these weaknesses in your business, and you have the foundation for making progress within your organization and for focusing on the innovations that will give you the greatest opportunity for success.

To bring the reverse salient concept into the present day, a new future for any organization is not possible without identifying a gap, a breach or an opening that a new future will emerge from. Without this gap, which only you can generate, only the past is possible because nothing is needed or wanted; there are no reverse salients. If it's not possible to perceive a gap, then there is nothing for you to cause into existence. Transformation begins and ends in the gap you create and stand inside of.

Mapping the gap is one of the most important elements for executing a future-based strategy. Now that you've identified the future you are committed to (Stage One) and you've cleared the past out of the equation by telling the brutal truth about it (Stage Two), you can begin to explore your gap. You want to lower yourself into the abyss — go through the funnel, step into the gap, and find out what's missing that you couldn't see while negative viral memes were running the show. ●

### Stage Four: Establish Real Authentic Accountability

In Stage Four, you will analyze, understand and negotiate new processes.

The outcome of business operations is the harvesting of value from assets owned by a business. Assets can be either physical or intangible.

One of the greatest unrecognized assets of your business is an act of speech called "A Promise to Take Action." Have you ever considered a promise to take some kind of action as an asset, let alone valued it as such? Probably not. Yet people in your company are making promises all day long. There are overt promises that people agree to make, and then there are the actions they take to fulfill their promises. Promises are intangible assets. How effective are you at wringing the value out of them?

#### What Is Accountability?

What does it mean to be accountable? Put differently, what does it mean to be count-on-able? Few people really know; and implementing accountability is a struggle when we don't even know what it is.

It starts with leadership. How can any organization hope to accomplish its mission when the leader struggles to get people to commit to take action and then fails to hold them accountable when they don't? What do you imagine that does to the future of your company?

Accountability might be characterized as the actions that people are assigned that would be consistent with the mission of the organization. For example, if it is the mission of the organization to provide services, then it is someone's accountability to make sure team development, marketing, sales, service and so forth are in place. Being accountable requires that people be count-on-able. This means making promises and keeping promises. People who are count-on-able are good for their word. They do what they say they will do.

#### Five Steps to Effective Promise Management

Promises are critical assets that you need to manage as effectively as you manage other asset resources in your organization. Here's how:

**Make promises.** Make clear promises to take action and produce a result that will move you and the organization closer to annual and/or monthly goals.

**Publish promises.** Issue promises publicly so that everyone can see who's pulling his or her weight. Attach promises to something that's tangible and visible to everyone so there's no question that a promise was made. There are no hidden or side deals.

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**Journal promises.** Keep a journal of promises so they don't disappear or go out of existence.

**Act on promises.** Complete promises on time to maintain integrity. If that doesn't happen, find out what's missing that prevented the promise from being kept. No shaming should be done for nonfulfillment.

**Measure promises.** Feedback is the critical element of consistency and reinforcement.

Accountability is something you declare you are taking on because you said you were taking it on, not because someone else is demanding that you do so. People can make requests all day, and you can accept those requests. But unless you determine that you are going to be accountable for the action you have promised, no one can give you accountability for anything. Accountability is up to you. ●

## The Connected Leader Meets the Connected Company

Unstoppable and connected leaders don't rely entirely on strategy to build their organizations; they leverage the principle of connectedness. Unconscious and disconnected leaders are reactive, behave automatically and are at the mercy of circumstances they can't change. Consciously connected leaders act intentionally and cause things to happen to stay on purpose.

As a consciously connected leader, your objective is to transform your organization and your teams into a "connected culture" by bringing conscious connectedness to the execution of strategy. At the core of transformation in your company is the transformation of yourself into a consciously connected leader.

### The Consciously Connected Leader

A consciously connected leader

- Supports the team and finds ways to remove barriers, so the team's work gets done faster and more effectively.
- Helps subordinates discover something for themselves and in the process become bigger (not smaller).
- Knows that benevolence goes a helluva long way.
- Never dismisses anyone from employment without first understanding and working through the core source of why that person is struggling.
- Doesn't shy away from setting unreasonable goals.

- Continues to look at the whole while making decisions that will only impact one area.
- Knows that success is not always about financial results.
- Always assembles the right people to get the job done.
- Trusts his or her employees because they are the ones closest to customers.
- Doesn't try to do it all.
- Never criticizes employees in front of others, whether they are direct reports or not.
- Acts with speed to allow employees to see that things are happening and acknowledges the source of the idea, giving all the credit away.
- Gets people to make promises and holds people accountable.
- Measures the keeping of promises.
- Empowers the leader of problem-solving workouts to make decisions on the spot and then elicit commitments from people with "by whens" (a date by which something is promised) to see them completed.

### The Consciously Connected Company

A consciously connected company (a Thirteener) has consciously connected employees. These employees are connected to the company's vision, comprehend the opportunities that are available to them and for the future of the organization, have a clear understanding of what mission-critical actions are needed to achieve those opportunities, and will execute the organization's agreed-upon strategy.

If you have consciously connected employees, you have the makings of a consciously connected business culture, one in which employees have a passionate commitment to each other and to the company's vision. ●

### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

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

1. ***The Learned Disciplines of Management* by Jim Burkett.** Jim Burkett presents a framework of individual disciplines that form a self-reinforcing management system for making the right things happen.
2. ***Choosing Change* by Susan Goldsworthy, Walter McFarland.** *Choosing Change* provides a framework called the Five Ds to compare key elements to be aware of during both individual and organizational change.
3. ***The Advantage* by Patrick Lencioni.** Patrick Lencioni's first nonfiction book provides leaders with a groundbreaking, approachable model for achieving organizational health.