

# THE THINKING STRATEGIST

*Unleashing the Power of Strategic Management to  
Identify, Explore and Solve Problems*



**VICKIE COX EDMONDSON**

*With a Foreword by David A. Thomas*

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Management to Identify, Explore  
and Solve Problems

By

Vickie Cox Edmondson  
*University of Georgia, USA*



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wrote this book to disseminate business knowledge and to promote high levels of achievement among leaders with disciplined minds who seek to change the world. First, I express my sincere appreciation to my highly engaged students, faculty, and colleagues at the University of Georgia (UGA), the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), Morehouse College, and Tuskegee University. Over the years, they have forced me to make tough decisions and deliver on my promises. I appreciate all who have supported my efforts to bring tough love and raised expectations to management classrooms. Learner success is paramount to my work.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vickie Cox Edmondson, Professor of Management, has taught strategic management, a business capstone course, since 1994. Prior to joining Tuskegee University in fall 2018, she taught the course for seven years at Morehouse College where she served as the first Associate Provost for Student Success. Dr. Cox Edmondson taught the course at the University of Alabama at Birmingham in an academic appointment for 15 years, and at the University of Georgia while pursuing a doctorate degree in the discipline.

Dr Cox Edmondson has written and coauthored academic and trade articles, book cases, and chapters. Her teaching, research, and consulting interests are in strategic management, business ethics, race and diversity issues in organizations, organizational change, and the critical voice. Her work has been published in *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *Business and Society*; *Journal of Business Ethics, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion*; *Journal of Organizational Change Management*; *Journal of Communication Management*, and others.

A captivating academic and management strategist, Vickie Cox Edmondson graduated cum laude from Spelman College with a BA in English. She holds a PhD in strategic management from the University of Georgia and an MBA from Mercer University. Bringing more than 20 years of industry experience, including business consulting, and senior level and board leadership in a nonprofit, to the classroom, Dr. Cox Edmondson is known as a challenging professor whose ultimate aim is to provide learners with the necessary skills to excel in business endeavors and advance in their careers.

Vickie co-founded and served as the Executive Director of Follow Me Foundation, Inc., a nonprofit established to help economically disadvantaged youth in her hometown community of Carroll County, Georgia. She also serves on the board of directors for Saint Smyrna Baptist Church in Newnan, Georgia and is a life member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.

Dr Vickie Cox Edmondson is the mother of three daughters. She enjoys traveling, socializing, and assessing the world around her for additional opportunities.

# FOREWORD

Today, we live in what some futurists have coined a VUCA world. A world that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. Responding effectively in this world requires that decisions be made closer to the frontline activity of organizations. How can this happen without creating chaos throughout organizations?

The answer is to have employees at every level able to think strategically about how to respond to conditions on the ground and in real time. This does not mean expanding strategic planning departments. It means developing more employees and especially frontline managers who can think strategically.

In the latter half of the twentieth century a combination of business academics, corporate executives at America's largest companies and leading consulting firms developed a set of reliable tools for setting strategy. These included the necessity to understand the organization's relationship to its environment, map its stakeholders, determine goals, and define how the organization competes and differentiates itself in the marketplace.

Organizations such as GE, GM, Citi, and IBM created large strategic planning departments that took up the task of defining strategy for their firms with five- and 10-year horizons. To staff these departments, these companies hired the best and brightest from top tier colleges such as Morehouse, Harvard, Yale, Howard, and Stanford. They also recruited talent out-of-top tier consulting firms such as McKinsey and BCG. Possessing their understanding of corporate strategy and the tools to set it, these individuals became valued employees. Many went on to lead major business units, not because they were technical experts but because they understood how to think strategically about the business.

The unspoken assumption was that companies only needed a few people who could think strategically. Strategic business decisions had long-term horizons. Only an elite group of managers defined by their intelligence and possession of the tools of strategic thinking were needed. They would sit at

the top of the corporate pyramid. This logic seemed supported by the rise and stability of large corporate behemoths in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Some realities of the marketplace for products and labor supported this view. Markets were relatively stable and innovation was slow. New products that seemed to capture the imagination of consumers could expect to last for years. A prime example was the mainframe computer. Few could imagine that one day we would have on our phones as much computing power as existed in the 3,000 sq. ft buildings that housed mainframes. Other examples were Xerox copiers, AT&T's long-distance telephone service, and the global reach of companies like Citibank. These marketplaces and companies were complex, but they were not volatile, uncertain, or ambiguous.

Labor markets mirrored this complex, but stable and slow changing environment. Career success was largely defined by earning a place on the professional and managerial hierarchy of one of these large corporations and riding the escalator up to management and eventually retirement. Career paths were long and orderly. A resume that showed employment in multiple firms was suspect.

This reality began to unravel with accelerating speed in the last two decades of the twentieth century and is not recognizable today. The competitive advantage of new technology today lasts less than a year before it is copied or matched and overcome by new innovation. The Internet has made prices so transparent that cost advantage lasts less than a day, think airline tickets. Customers are less and less captive to services, think telephone numbers which are now owned by the consumer not the phone company.

A parallel unraveling has happened with labor markets. The social contract between companies and employees no longer exchanges loyalty for job security and longevity. Employees demand that companies increase the portability of their human capital. Most individuals will work for multiple companies before they reach retirement.

This new environment is requiring companies to delegate decision rights to those closer to the frontline where employees and customers meet. It is also demanding that employees throughout the firm know how to think strategically. Most important is that the ability to think strategically will become a skill set by which employees will be selected and evaluated for selection and advancement.

*The Thinking Strategist* is the first book to address this reality. It describes the tools of strategy making in an accessible way. Professor Vickie Cox Edmondson makes a compelling case for why being a **thinking strategist** is necessary whether you are a senior manager trying to break through to the next level or a person early in your career.

David A. Thomas,  
*Prominent Management Scholar And  
The 12th President Of Morehouse College*