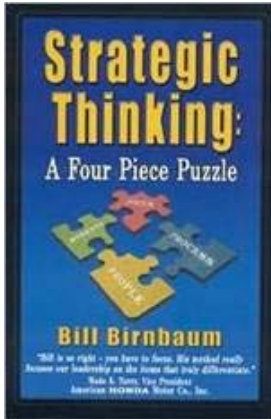


## PM World Today Book Review



**Book Title:** *Strategic Thinking: A Four Piece Puzzle*

**Author:** Bill Birnbaum

**Publisher:** Douglas Mountain Publishing

**List Price:** US\$ 16.95 (soft cover)

**Publication Date:** January 2004

**ISBN:** 1-932632-13-1

**Reviewer:** Hussein Mzee

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### Introduction to the Book

Bill Birnbaum's *Strategic Thinking: A Four Piece Puzzle* is a handy and easy-to-follow guide for managers and strategy planners concerning basic business concerns. The book covers numerous strategy areas from adapting to the product life cycle in a market, to areas such as anticipating the inevitable decline in demand for new products and compensating counteractions. The book also analyzes in detail staff performance issues by discussing how to get the best out of your reports, to judiciously applying the "80-20 rule" (20% of the input is usually responsible for 80% of the output, and total output can be significantly improved by focusing on that 20%). The core message Birnbaum drives at throughout this book is to learn how to focus on a few objectives and getting them done right. *Strategic Thinking* is an easy read, written in straightforward, accessible terms.

### Overview of Book's Structure

There's something for everyone in this book. The book is divided into four parts; Focus; Markets; People; and Process with relevant chapters under each Part. In light of my own strategy related work, understanding the Opportunity Grid in Chapter 6 alone, with its many diverse applications in business was worth the value of the whole book. With some adaptation, I was able to synergize the power of this Opportunity Grid with power tools from other resources and as a result my analytical as well as opportunity sensing capabilities grew exponentially. To me, the Opportunity Grid, even though it has its origins from George Steiner's pioneering work, is really a brilliant piece of work by the author. This is just one example, there are many more similar 'take-aways' from this book to suit different strategic and business needs.

The author's artful illustration of Pareto's Law or the 80/20 Rule in business, although not a new concept, is also very refreshing. There is a very useful index, and some of the best information in the book can be found here! Throughout the book, Birnbaum keeps your interest up and delivers on his promise to 'steepen your growth curve, brighten your profit picture, and help you lead your management team.'

### **Highlights: What I liked!**

This book is written in warm, down-to-earth style, giving the reader the impression that they are spending quality one-on-one time with a senior consultant and coach. Birnbaum's unconventional wisdom comes through in this most readable book on Business Strategy. It's not often that you hear someone say that it's "okay to be mediocre" The author let's you know that as long as you are excelling at those few important strategic goals, it's acceptable to be mediocre at everything else. The book is refreshing, honest, and straightforward.

Birnbaum also provides in this book practical advice on strategic processes and procedures. Not only does he share with the reader what we might consider doing, he goes about explaining how we might do it. Most consultants in the business are willing to share what they believe you should do, but when it gets to the "how" they mostly issue proposals instead of contracts! In contrast, Bill Birnbaum, throughout this book, shares with the readers the how as well as the what and the why!

The book offers a refreshing explanation of the most important concepts and techniques in strategic thinking based on what the author terms "a four piece puzzle" made up of focus, process, people and markets. This is a practical book, based on the author's extensive experience and sharp analytical discourse.

I recommend the book for those interested in strategic management, organizational change, the future of business and industry as well as strategy consultants. The stories and examples are right-on, enlightening, useful and very meaningful. This is a unique book which is a significant and welcome advance from the traditional strategic management processes that we've been accustomed to reading.

I particularly enjoyed reading about the opportunity grid which helps managers conceptualize and envision their specific strategic options. I also highly appreciated the insight and advice on how to successfully build knowledge in my organization which is key to be successful and competitive in today's highly competitive operating environment.

### **Shortfalls: What was Missing!**

Besides reinforcing some of the things we know, such as "focus on doing the right things more than on doing things right," we are treated to lively and real life examples and stories exemplifying the strategies Bill Birnbaum lays out. I would have liked a separate stand-alone

section with a deep-dive analysis on how all the four puzzle pieces - focus, process, people, and markets - mesh

### Who might benefit from the Book

I recommend this book to business managers and decision makers of all skill and experience levels. This book will provide you a great overview of the most important frameworks relating to strategic thinking. It covers a lot of ground, and everything it covers, it covers enough that you can apply to it. There's very little fluff. Bill Birnbaum's style is easy to follow and also jargon-free. He's probably the kind of consultant you may want to hire.

### Conclusion

If you've read many strategy books, you'd notice they often can be summed up in 3-5 pages. The rest is all padding and fluff to make it into a book. Birnbaum's Strategic Thinking is a relatively small book (200 pages) which contains so much in so little. You can read ten other books on the subject if you're busy, but read this if you're busier! If you are looking for an excellent treatise on strategic thinking without all the prose you find in many books and some consultancies, then this is it. It's a quick read with quickly reaped rewards. All-in-all, it's a well written book that is among the good books that you will find on the subject.

More information about the book can be found at [www.BirnbaumAssociates.com](http://www.BirnbaumAssociates.com).

#### About the Reviewer:



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**Hussein Mzee** holds an MBA from the Project Management Executive MBA program at the University of Texas at Dallas. Mzee has wide global experience with major IT and telecommunication companies. He is currently a member of the Strategy team at Perot Systems, a Fortune 1000 company, and is based in the company's global headquarters in Plano, Texas. He can be contacted at [Hussein.Mzee@ps.net](mailto:Hussein.Mzee@ps.net).