One of the difficulties in writing a review of Professor Ted Marra’s recently published book, “Competing to Win: The Wisdom Chronicles”, is to do the work justice in a short space. In saying that I have already alluded to the depth and breadth of understanding, insight and exemplar packed into this unassuming and easy to read work. There are many ideas that resonate, and are brought sharply into focus when reading the book, but in my view one of the most important is that the author demonstrates and advocates that business boils down to ‘the relentless focus on a vital few things’ – these ‘things’ are highlighted in the book and are distilled from his hands-on, real-world experiences – many of which are colourfully articulated as examples.

The book commences with a discussion of the cornerstone elements of business and organizational management. However, the manner in which he deals with these aspects of leadership, purpose, culture and values, vision, renewal, principles of engagement and alignment, are anything but mundane or ‘old hat’. The concept of renewal is central to the author’s ideal of the competitive organization and is expertly woven into the fabric of the overarching model presented in the book. It is obvious that in the exploration of this concept that the author has given it consideration over many years and his examples amply demonstrate this. He analyses how organizations such as Nordstroms (114 years), Proctor and Gamble, and Nestle continuously refresh their business model and stay connected to their customers, markets and value chain, whereas Kodak did not and died after 120 years...in addition, he looks at how, within newer successful organizations such as Amazon and Google, renewal appears to be a part of their genetic make-up.

Dr. Marra brings his conception of the “business model” to life with substantive reason and example. The author defines the ‘business model’ quite differently and more innovatively than has been done to date. In his own words ‘it is not only the soul or spirit of an organization, it is indeed the heart from which passion, energy and inspiration flow to all who are in the organization as well as to all key stakeholders linked to the organization.’ Further to this, he observes that the ‘business model’ must be defined, refined and ‘driven’ by the leadership team, and that certain characteristics of the leadership team make more of a positive difference to the business model than others. It is in this area that the author laments seeing most leadership teams going wayward in their approach and thinking, thereby getting the business model wrong.

The work insightfully examines how the aforementioned attributes are elemental to, and interrelate within the organization in the context of “capturing and delivering value” to all stakeholders. In this respect, one of the key elements of the model presented by the author is ‘alignment’. The author emphasizes and underscores how ‘alignment’ must be assured within each component of the management system in order to create and deliver value, unbroken, along the strategy-execution continuum. In the broadest sense the author suggests that this requires ‘alignment’ of the organization around its ‘vision’ in order to harness the full power and potential of the organization in its drive to achieve the ‘vision’. Implied within this proposition are the critical success factors for achieving the vision; the drivers of performance in those critical areas; the key business objectives and strategies which support their achievement; and finally the flawless execution of these strategies. To support all of the above components, including the organization’s ‘hyper-decision making’ capability, the author proposes that there must be a ‘sensing system’ or ‘strategic information architecture’. Such a system, he explains, has appropriate and advanced analytical tools necessary to convert data into actionable information, identify and assess opportunities and threats, emerging trends, changing requirements and competitive intelligence.
Another of the more significant aspects of the work is the discussion of how and why creating behaviours and an orientation to organization effectiveness and efficiency should be animated by a positive ethos and values that support the success of all stakeholders, rather than a predominating drive for ‘shareholder value’. One of the main ideas underpinning the work is that “the true purpose of business (or any organization) is to create and deliver value.” The author identifies 9 main sources of value and contends that most organizations exploit only 2 – 3 of these, not even doing this particularly well!

After a thorough discussion of the core business building blocks (mentioned above) Marra turns his attention to current and future thinking on the competencies and capabilities of the organization, extending the discussion from the ‘inside-out’ aspects of execution effectiveness to a discussion of ‘brand’ and the marketing mix, giving this a thoughtful spin that relies on his deep real-world management and executive advisory experience. His observations are clear and concise, and his prodigious knowledge of academic literature in the field is evident. However, it is important to note that while there is appropriate discussion of academic business literature this is not an academic work per se, rather it is a practitioner’s work that predominantly draws upon the author’s experience and only references academic literature in order to appropriately reinforce the points he makes. In this regard, most of the academic references point the reader in the direction of other texts on the matters under specific consideration should the reader wish to delve more deeply into a particular aspect.

In the next segment of the book the author draws together the prior concepts and discussion, detailing what he calls the ‘sensing system’. The sensing system is the key to managing information, turning it into a ‘strategic asset’ when the right information reaches the right people (especially decision-makers) at the right time, thereby facilitating what the author terms ‘hyper decision-making’. Hyper decision-making is reminiscent of Peter Senge’s postulate that the only remaining source of sustainable competitive advantage is the organization’s speed of learning. In other words, the speed at which information (intelligence) is delivered to decision-makers enabling optimal decisions to be made (right across and up and down the organization) is a competitive differentiator. The author then describes how to leverage the sensing system and relates some excellent examples of success and failure, as well as recovery of businesses that have pursued initiatives such that they have become value-destructive. He demonstrates in stark terms just how consequential a balanced approach to implementing individual business initiatives are to successful outcomes, or otherwise.

In the final section of the book Marra looks to the future, not necessarily in terms of futurism, though the sensing system is, in a manner of speaking, the predictive, anticipatory part of the organization through which he suggests it may best become future-oriented if not completely future-proof, as well as the engine of innovation and renewal. The manner in which the author outlines his view of the future is by re-invigorating the arguably tired concept of the ‘Balanced Scorecard’, extending it significantly in terms of CSF’s, KBO’s, KPI’s, what to measure, the metrics themselves and the entire performance management system. In so doing, he provides a revitalized approach to ideas and activities such as agility and resilience, value creation and delivery, technology, information architecture, relationship mastery, hyper-decision making, operational and human performance excellence and more... One of the strengths of the work is that the author also includes a list of suggested questions (at the end of each chapter) for management teams to consider when making decisions and in order to focus (or refocus) their efforts by bringing them back into alignment with the organization’s strategic aims. These questions are excellent and compelling – at all levels of management – and are always linked to shared values, objectives and creating and delivering value. For these tips and questions alone the book is an impressive read.
In sum, the book is of universal value and offers much to business people of all levels; from the team leader, to the middle and senior manager for whom the work refines and extends ideas that will assist them to see the organization as a whole (as a system) as well as to locate themselves and their role in the organization’s value chain. To the seasoned executive it provides a refreshing view of the organization, and the ever more complex dynamics required to define, align and execute on strategies and business models that are continuously and deliberately tested and refreshed through the organization’s “sensing system” - or as the author affectionately calls it ‘the whiskers of the cat’...There is no substantive aspect of organization effectiveness and management that is not covered in this work which is in equal part informative and entertaining...while I’m not certain that the author meant it to be so, it is as such that I recommend the work to all levels of management as one of excellent educational value, as well as a great piece of ‘infotainment’.