

# Book Review

November 2014

## ***Who Says Elephants Can't Dance? Inside IBM's Historic Turnaround.***

Louis V. Gerstner Jr., HarpersCollins Publishing, Inc., 2002.

### Summary

Mr. Gerstner took the CEO role when IBM was in the dumps. His success demonstrates that leadership matters, and smart leadership matters more. As Chairman of RJR Nabisco and American Express, Mr. Gerstner had a well-established reputation for successful corporate leadership before joining IBM.

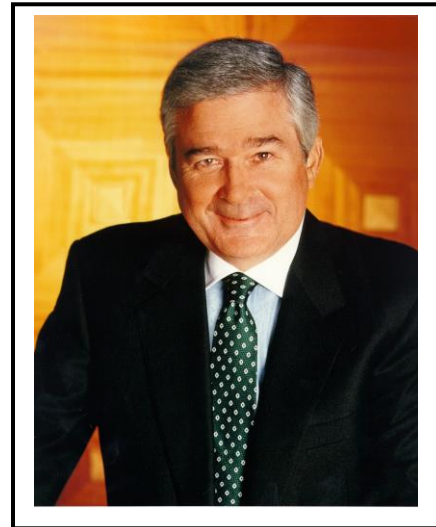
His book recounts his tenure at IBM and the transition of the “elephant” from a hardware manufacturer to a service company dedicated to becoming “the foremost integrator of technologies.” His tale of vision, strategy and execution are great examples of a sensitive approach to stockholders, customers and employees, during the initial days during tenuous times.

The book is a great and inspiring instruction manual on how to be a CEO. Mr. Gerstner delicately blends vision, strategy and execution, each an essential factor; but above all, execution.

### Highlights for Leading the American City

1. There will never be enough skilled workers.
2. Technology enables the declining number of leaders to expand their range and influence.
3. Integrators reign.
4. Execution trumps vision and strategy.
5. Successful strategies are long on details, short on vision.
6. The role of the CEO is critical; it can drive culture, strategy, change and urgency.
7. The most important rules are never written down.
8. Committees don't make decisions.
9. Embrace the power of network.
10. About IBM:
  - It's a national treasure,
  - It can drive the industry,
  - It's personal.
11. The world system is now based on plenty, not scarcity.

Summary  
Highlights  
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### Lou Gerstner, Jr.

Louis Vincent Gerstner, Jr. is an American businessman, best known for his tenure as chairman of the board and chief executive officer of IBM from April 1993 until 2002 when he retired as CEO in March and chairman in December. [Wikipedia](#)

**Born:** March 1, 1942

[Mineola, NY](#)

**Books:** [Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?: Inside IBM's Historic Turnaround](#)

**Education:**

[Dartmouth College](#), [Harvard Business School](#), [Chaminade High School](#)

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**YouTube:** In addition to the reviews cited below, check out:

### Business Investment Book Summary: Who Says Elephants Can't Dance? Inside IBM's Historic Turnaround...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRNwD50LWNE>

### Louis V Gerstner IBM Leadership (DCP 2010) Syracuse University, Richard Rodriguez

Uploaded on Nov 28, 2009

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzwDaHxI1Ho>

### Published Reviews

#### AMAZON

*Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?* sums up Lou Gerstner's historic business achievement, bringing IBM back from the brink of insolvency to lead the computer business once again. Offering a unique case study drawn from decades of experience at some of America's top companies - McKinsey, American Express, RJR Nabisco - Gerstner's insights into management and leadership are applicable to any business, at any level. Ranging from strategy to public relations, from finance to organization, Gerstner reveals the lessons of a lifetime running highly successful companies.

<http://www.amazon.com/Who-Says-Elephants-Cant-Dance/dp/0060523808>



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### Book Summary

In 1990, IBM had its most profitable year ever. By 1993, the computer industry had changed so rapidly the company was on its way to losing \$16 billion and IBM was on a watch list for extinction -- victimized by its own lumbering size, an insular corporate culture, and the PC era IBM had itself helped invent.

Then Lou Gerstner was brought in to run IBM. Almost everyone watching the rapid demise of this American icon presumed Gerstner had joined IBM to preside over its continued dissolution into a confederation of autonomous business units. This strategy, well underway when he arrived, would have effectively eliminated the corporation that had invented many of the industry's most important technologies.

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Instead, Gerstner took hold of the company and demanded the managers work together to re-establish IBM's mission as a customer-focused provider of computing solutions. Moving ahead of his critics, Gerstner made the bold decision to keep the company together, slash prices on his core product to keep the company competitive, and almost defiantly announced, "The last thing IBM needs right now is a vision."

*Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?* tells the story of IBM's competitive and cultural transformation. In his own words, Gerstner offers a blow-by-blow account of his arrival at the company and his campaign to rebuild the leadership team and give the workforce a renewed sense of purpose. In the process, Gerstner defined a strategy for the computing giant and remade the ossified culture bred by the company's own success.

The first-hand story of an extraordinary turnaround, a unique case study in managing a crisis, and a thoughtful reflection on the computer industry and the principles of leadership, *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?* sums up Lou Gerstner's historic business achievement. Taking readers deep into the world of IBM's CEO, Gerstner recounts the high-level meetings and explains the pressure-filled, no-turning-back decisions that had to be made. He also offers his hard-won conclusions about the essence of what makes a great company run.

In the history of modern business, many companies have gone from being industry leaders to the verge of extinction. Through the heroic efforts of a new management team, some of those companies have even succeeded in resuscitating themselves and living on in the shadow of their former stature. But only one company has been at the pinnacle of an industry, fallen to near collapse, and then, beyond anyone's expectations, returned to set the agenda. That company is IBM.

[https://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book\\_number/1130/who-says-elephants-cant-dance](https://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book_number/1130/who-says-elephants-cant-dance)

### Related Readings

1. ***Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't***, Collins, James Charles, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., New York, 2001.
2. ***In Search of Excellence : Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies***, Peters, Thomas J. and Robert H. Waterman, Jr, Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., New York, 1982.
3. ***Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth***, Fuller, Buckminster R. [1885-1983], Southern Illinois University Press, 1969. Pocket Book edition published November, 1970; 7<sup>th</sup> printing, October, 1974.
4. ***Playing to Win, How Strategy Really Works***, A.G. Lafley and Roger L. Martin, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass., 2013.
5. ***Smart Machines, IBM's Watson and the Era of Cognitive Computing***, John E. Kelly III and Steve Hamm, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013.
6. ***The Art of Being Unreasonable, Lessons in Unconventional Thinking***, Eli Broad, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, NJ, 2012.

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7. ***The Art of the Long View, Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World***, Peter Schwartz, Currency Doubleday, 1991.
8. ***The Cleveland Clinic Way, Lessons in Excellence From One of the World's Leading Healthcare Organizations***, Toby Cosgrove, MD., McGraw-Hill Education, 2014.
9. ***The Idea Factory: Bell Labs and the Great Age of American Innovation*** [Paperback], Jon Gertner, The Penguin Press, NY, 2012.
10. ***Wikinomics, How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything***, Don Tapscott, Portfolio, a member of Penguin Group [USA], NY, 324 pages, 2006.

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