

# Anticipating the Unknowable Future

Jacques van de Ven on Realizing Your Company's Potential



By Vickery Eckhoff

**W**here will your company's profits come from five years down the road? "Half from products, customers and markets you have now, and half from ones that don't yet exist," asserts Jacques van de Ven, Vice Chairman of the Board of the Zenith Life Assurance Company.

Van de Ven is in good company: both 3M's Sr. VP of R&D, William Coyne and Intel's CEO and president, Paul Otellini, happen to agree.

"Ten years from now, I expect that half of our sales will come from products that were introduced in the previous four years," Coyne

says. And Otellini? "We develop technology for markets that don't exist for products that don't exist," he states.

Realizing potential can be challenging for companies—but it's not mystical. "No one knows what will happen in five years, but sources for future profits exist—you just need to uncover them," states van de Ven, a former CEO with deep experience championing growth and change in companies selling products as diverse as life insurance, industrial packaging, consumer goods (baby diapers) and luxury watches and doing business in markets that range from Europe, North and Latin America, to the Middle East and Asia.

---

## Qualities of Visionary Companies

- Learn by trial and error
- Take calculated risks
- Challenge status quo
- Go beyond doing things right

Growing up in his father's fur company, van de Ven has business in his blood. When a family illness left him in charge at a young age, he quickly learned every aspect of running a business, while also gaining the ability to see the whole picture.

His approach—not just doing things right, but asking whether the right things are being done to realize a company's potential—has taken him from marketing and product development for Procter & Gamble, to the Rotary Watch Company as President and Managing Director; the Skandia Insurance Company as President and COO of Skandia Life AG; and Illinois Tool Works, as General Manager of Paper Products Europe and CEO of various subsidiaries.

“You can take a strategy that works in one country, such as the US, and implement it internationally—you can do everything ‘right’, van de Ven says, “and it can fail because it’s wrong for the foreign marketplace.” So what’s a company to do to “uncover profits” in markets that don’t exist from products that don’t exist? What, exactly, are the “right things to do” to reach your company’s potential in a market outside the US?

Van de Ven starts with people, working closely and empowering them to make their own changes—a strategy he shares with 3M’s Coyne. That approach helped van de Ven to grow a small European industrial packaging operation for Illinois Tool Works (ITW) to four times its

original size by acquiring 12 companies and adding four greenfield operations.

“My approach is classical,” van de Ven explains. “In terms of process, I often apply an 80/20 or Top 10 process, looking at accounts and products to help the leadership shift their focus from internal to external, toward customers, markets, opportunities.”

Talking to customers is key. “The Rotary Watch Company lost money for 10 years before getting back to the customer,” van de Ven states. As president and managing director, he restored revenue growth and profitability by restructuring the business into three operating divisions, setting up a product development unit and focusing marketing activities on the customer purchase decision.

**“3M gives employees the option to direct themselves for 25% of their time. During this period, they can work on projects of their own choosing, their own design, without management approval.”**

**—William Coyne, 3M**

Looking for opportunity throughout the organization is also essential. While working for P&G International, van de Ven created world product teams, incorporating global data into US-led product development. This laid the groundwork for the introduction of Pampers into world

markets, ultimately providing 50% of global product profits by a team of soap sellers with little knowledge of babies and baby care, who were transformed into a powerful and successful sales team.

Anticipating opportunity is a skill van de Ven honed as a former Dutch epee fencing

champion. He rose to the top by studying his competition and responding in a nimble, almost intuitive fashion. “A fencing match is not something you can preplan,” says van de Ven. “Reading your fencing opponent, much like reading the marketplace, reveals strengths and weaknesses that you act on in real time.”

Risk taking is endemic to the process of taking action. “Visionary companies make some of their best moves by experimentation, trial and error, opportunities and, quite literally, by accident,” says James Collins in his business bestseller, *Built to Last*. One of van de Ven’s most profitable calculated risks was introducing the Always brand of feminine protection into markets like Greece, the Middle East and Singapore—even before it was launched in the US—a gamble that paid off handsomely for Procter & Gamble, but required significant skill in overcoming existing cultural obstacles.

Van de Ven has years of experience navigating such complexities, not just cultural and human, but structural and regulatory as well. As president and COO of Skandia Life AG, he set up

the Swiss arm of Scandinavia’s largest insurance company and introduced innovative unit-linked insurance products that required him to take on Swiss tax regulations and entrenched industry practices to pave the way for future growth. His successful challenge of the status quo won a Swiss Supreme Court decision that forever changed the industry.

In other expansion situations, van de Ven has found that managing risk can also require innovation. As president of the Swiss music festival Les Classiques de Villars, he advocated for a patient and sustainable geographic expansion plan to bring music to nearby towns. A scaled-down offering and a charitable partnership provided the new concert venues with enough time to build the patron support it needed to become self-funding.

“Achieving your potential doesn’t happen without challenging the status quo and asking the hard questions,” van de Ven says matter-of-factly. It’s an integral part of his method—of knowing what are the right things to do and the right questions to ask to discover hidden potential, regardless of how unknowable the future may seem. ■

“Set up a small group. Not very big, but small or a couple of small groups...to really go out and look at where you could find growth relatively soon.”

— Rita McGrath and Ian MacMillan,  
*Discovery Driven Growth*

## Jacques van de Ven

### Vital Statistics

- Born August 11, 1944, in Tilburg, The Netherlands

### Education

- Graduated 1971, Eindhoven University of Technology, degree in Physics
- Completed two years of MBA at Rotterdam Erasmus University

### Fast Facts

- Interests include golf, skiing, fencing and investing
- Former Dutch epee fencing champion
- Multilingual: English, Dutch, German, French, Spanish

### Career Highlights

- Vice-chairman, Zenith Life Assurance
- President, Paper Products Europe, Illinois Tool Works
- President/COO, Skandia Life AG
- President/Managing Director, Rotary Watch Company
- Senior marketing and product development roles, P&G International

### Board Memberships

- Zenith Life Assurance
- Gédimat group of companies
- CLG Musique
- Festival Les Classiques de Villars

