

The Three Laws of Performance

Rewriting the Future of Your Organization and Your Life
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Introduction

When something isn't working in our work lives, we struggle with which part of the problem to tackle first. Do we start with cost reduction? What about morale? Or should we begin with process improvement?

In our personal lives, it's the same dilemma - which problem do we work on first? Should we resolve to do better with home finances? Make our marriage more fulfilling? Get rid of 10 pounds? Spend more time with the kids?

The optimist says there's opportunity everywhere we look. The pessimist says everything is messed up, and it's as though every system is perfectly designed to stay messed up, no matter how many things we try to fix.

We pick the problem to work on and we either fail or succeed. If we fail, we add "frustration" to our list of problems. If we succeed, a new problem pops up to replace the old one. The solution to a problem becomes the next problem.

We cut 10% of our department budget and our star performers leave in frustration, experiencing a lack of support for projects that are important to them. We quit smoking and gain 10 pounds. We go to the gym to lose the weight, and our family complains we're not at home enough. We spend more time at home and our boss gripes that we're not getting enough done, the budget is out of control and when are we going to fire the next person we can't afford to lose? It's so much stress that before we know it we're smoking again.

It's as if the system we're working on - the company, finances, health, our personal life - is an old inner tube. The moment we patch one hole and add pressure, another spot opens up.

People spend their lives perfecting the art of improvement - more, better, different, faster. Using this approach, many problems seem intractable. As the French proverb says, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

A Future Already Written

The reason that fixing problems often doesn't deliver expected results is that the result is only superficial. The underlying dynamics that perpetuate the problem are left untouched.

For every "problem," there's a future that has already been written about it. This future includes people's assumptions, hopes, fears, resignation, cynicism and "lessons learned" through past experiences. Although this future is almost never talked about, it's the context in which people try to create change.

If you went into a company struggling to fix problems and got employees talking about the future, they would probably say something like, "It will never work out. We're mired in politics, so when we do bring a product to market, it's two years too late, and that's not going to change. Our leaders will never lead - it's not in them. We'll just waste away until we're bought or shut down."

Although most people have never articulated what they *really* think will happen to them personally or organizationally, they live every moment as if it's destined to come about. Employees are reduced to going through the motions, never fully engaging, never taking on the politics that they believe is holding the company back.

If you interviewed the leaders in this company, you would hear a future that's correlated with what the employees describe something like, "People here don't care and they never will. We invite their ideas but they never come through with anything good. We don't have the money to replace them with star performers, so we'll always be B players in this industry. We'll continue to do the best we can, but as a company we'll never really succeed."

Rewriting the Future

Two points are crucial here. First, everyone experiences a future in front of them, even though few could articulate it. It goes beyond what they expect to happen, hope will happen or think might happen. This future lives at a gut level. We *know* it's what will happen, whether we can give words to it or not. This is the *default future*, and every person has one. So does every organization.

Second, people's relationship with the default future is complex. If someone described your default future to you, you might disagree, perhaps even get angry at how different that future is from what you think will happen. Yet you - along with the rest of us - live as if that future is preordained. You live into your default future, unaware that by doing so you're making it come about.

Statistical evidence shows that most significant change efforts fail. The reason is that regardless of the management interventions that are tried, the default futures of employees and leaders are still in place. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

For things to change, the future must be rewritten. The result is the transformation of a situation, leading to a dramatic elevation in performance.

Imagine if in that struggling company, people rewrote their future. What if it was this: "We've turned around the company. We've come from behind and set the standard for the industry. We're people who work together, innovate and succeed."

It's not a matter of motivational speeches or slogans that people repeat. It's rewriting what people know will happen. Rewrite the future, and people's actions naturally shift: from disengaged to proactive, from resigned to inspired, from frustrated to innovative.

If we could rewrite the future across a critical mass of people, we could transform a tired company into an innovator, a burned-out culture into one of inspiration, a command-and-control structure into a system in which everyone pulls for each other's success.

That happens without targeting the problems themselves. Rewrite the future and old problems disappear.

The First Law

The First Law of Performance is: *How people perform correlates to how situations occur to them.*

The first law answers the question, "Why do people do what they do?" Consider that when we do something, it always makes complete sense to *us*. On the other hand, when *others* do something, we often wonder, "Why are they doing that? It doesn't make any sense!"

But if we got into the world of that person and looked at how the situation occurred to him, we would consider those same actions we were questioning to be completely and absolutely the perfect and correct thing for him to do, given how the situation is occurring to that person.

We all assume that the way things occur for us is how they're occurring for others. But situations occur differently for each person. Not realizing this can make another person's actions seem inappropriate.

The first law rejects the commonsense view of actions - that people do what they do in a situation because of a common understanding of the facts.

When people relate to each other as if each is dealing with the same set of facts, they've fallen into the reality illusion. To see the reality illusion at work, think of a person you aren't happy with at the moment - perhaps someone you've been resenting for years.

Think of words that describe that person. You might say "self-centered," "doesn't listen," "opinionated" or "irrational." You might be willing to swear on a stack of bibles that those words are accurate. But notice that you've described how the person *occurs* to you.

None of us sees things as they are. We see how things occur to us. What looks like reality as you consider issues and performance challenges is only how reality occurs to you.

The Second Law

The Second Law of Performance is: *How a situation occurs arises in language.*

Language is the means through which your future is already written. It's also the means through which it can be rewritten.

Language should be understood here in the broadest sense. It includes not only spoken and written communication, but also body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, pictures and drawings, music, how people dress, and any other actions that have symbolic intent.

Untying the knots of language begins with seeing that whenever you say something, other communication is carried along with it. That phenomenon can be called *the unsaid but communicated*. Sometimes the sender is aware of the unsaid; often he or she is not. The unsaid is the most important part of language when it comes to elevating performance.

The unsaid but communicated includes assumptions, expectations, disappointments, resentments, regrets, interpretations, significance and issues that occur to us as dangerous.

When you walk into a company for a meeting, make a sales call or apply for a job, you can see instantly how the company occurs to employees, and how people occur to each other. Like little cartoon bubbles floating over people's heads, you can read what people aren't saying but are communicating. The messages run the gamut, from "I'm so bored and I wonder what's for lunch" to "My work is more important than yours."

This communication is channeled in many different ways - in what people say, how they say it, their gestures, tones, eye contact and so on. It's unsaid and communicated without awareness.

That language must be addressed to turn around performance. The process starts with becoming aware of what people aren't saying but are communicating. It starts with people saying what they've been thinking. As the process continues, people discover what's lurking behind their thoughts and opinions. That opens up space to move beyond the current language and future and create something new.

The Third Law

The Third Law of Performance is: *Future-based language transforms how situations occur to people.*

The third law rests on a fundamental distinction: there are two different ways to use language. The first is descriptive - using language to depict or represent things as they are or have been. The test of good descriptive language is whether it accurately articulates the world as it is, whether people see the world rightly. Descriptive language is often used to look back, spot trends and predict what will happen.

Descriptive language has its limits - you can't create something new by merely describing what was and is. Using descriptive language to talk about the future is limited to prediction based on past cycles and current reality.

Future-based language, also called generative language, has the power to create new futures, to craft vision and to eliminate the blinders that are preventing people from seeing possibilities. It doesn't describe how a situation occurs - it transforms how it occurs. It does this by rewriting the future.

At the Polus Group, a large conglomerate built by a man of vision, Toshima Nakauchi, the default future that emerged after his incapacitating stroke - what people expected - was "the company would have no leadership because the founder is not coming back." That was changed through a six-month process. The goal of that process was to develop a future in which every member of the 60-person team leading the effort had an authentic voice in creating a new vision.

The future emerged from the group working two days a month for six months, often a roller-coaster ride of chaotic creative conversation and often an agonizingly long alignment conversation. When a proposal was presented, it would be projected on a screen and the facilitator would check if anyone was not aligned with it. Hands would go up, and someone would be picked to present a counterproposal. The two proposers would interact until they were aligned. They would then ask if anyone else wasn't aligned. The process would continue until everyone was aligned - and the language for the new future and a new business model had been constructed.

By replacing the default future with their own creation, people collectively lived into an optimistic, exciting future. The old problems simply dropped away, and everyone's performance altered.

Conclusion

The Three Laws of Performance help you to reflect on your situation, how it shackles you and how you can create a new future by rewriting the unsaid language around you.

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About the authors: [Steve Zaffron](#) is CEO of the Vanto Group, a global consulting firm. [Dave Logan](#) is a senior partner of CultureSync, a management consulting firm, and co-author of [Tribal Leadership](#).

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