The Three Laws of Performance
by Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan

The Power of Future-Based Language
TRANSFORM YOURSELF, TRANSFORM YOUR ORGANIZATION

QUICK OVERVIEW

How many times have you participated in a business meeting and heard someone say, “That will never work. We’ve tried that before,” and cringed at the negativity and wondered how to get past it and move forward? If your answer is “Too many times to count,” The Three Laws of Performance might give you some insight on how to change the corporate culture within your organization to make your team members want to give their all for sustained future success.

Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan, through years of business consulting and teaching, have come to the conclusion that language dictates how people and organizations perceive themselves. They believe that if you can communicate with yourself and your employees in a positive, forward-thinking way, you can change the way you do business in the modern world.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE

Zaffron and Logan defy the conventional wisdom that if you want to increase performance you need to change or fix the way you do things. “Remember,” they warn, “whatever you resist, persists.” To understand this concept, you merely have to imagine how effective it is to try to get a spouse to change an annoying behavior. The more you try to change him or her, the greater their resistance. Zaffron and Logan claim the same applies to organizations.

They advise leaders to encourage the members of their organizations to clean out past negativity and to stop trying to envision the future through the lens of the past, which creates reduced expectations and what the authors refer to as a “default future.” Instead, the authors say, “Use future-based language and declare what’s important.”

Zaffron and Logan offer some compelling theories about what makes people and organizations behave the way they do and how to alter that behavior for greater corporate and community gains. They hold up a number of successful organizations as examples of how to make the “Three Laws of Performance” work, including The Polus Group, Reebok and Lonmin. However, moving from theory to workable strategy requires more work than reading this book. But if you want to know why
changes you’ve implemented in your life or your organization haven’t produced the results you’d hoped, The Three Laws of Performance might tell you why.

INTRODUCTION

In our work lives, when something isn’t working, we struggle with which part of the problem to tackle first.

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?

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

For every “problem,” there is a future that’s already been written about it. This future includes people’s assumption, hope, fears, resignation, cynicism and “lessons learned” through past experience. Although this future is almost never talked about, it is the context in which people try to create change.

Everyone experiences a future in front of them, even though few can articulate it. This future lives at a gut level. We know it’s what will happen, whether we can give words to it or not. We call this the *default future*, and every person has one. So does every organization.

This book isn’t about change management—more, better or different. It’s about rewriting the future. The result is the transformation of a situation, leading to a dramatic elevation in performance. Rewrite the future, and old problems disappear.

THE FIRST LAW OF PERFORMANCE

The first law of performance is: “How people perform correlates to how situations occur to them.” It 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 question, “Why are they doing that? It doesn’t make any sense!” Each person assumes that the way things occur for him or her is how they are occurring for another. But situations occur differently for each person. Not realizing this can make another’s actions seem out of place.

Your perspective is itself part of the way in which the world occurs to you. Although there certainly are facts about how and why things are the way they are, the facts of the matter are much less important than the way those facts occur to us.

Given the different positions that well-informed, intelligent people often take on a situation, there is a significant difference between objective facts of the matter and the way those facts occur to each of us. When people relate to each other as if each is dealing with the same set of facts, they have fallen into the reality illusion.

Consider the issues in your life; those parts of your life that aren’t working. You will take a big step toward transforming them—not merely trying to change them—if you see that you aren’t seeing them as they are. The reality illusion will try to convince you that you are. But, just as it is for the rest of us, what looks like reality is only how reality occurs to you.

The first law, then, says that there are two elements: performance and how a situation occurs. Become aware of how your own performance correlates with how situations occur to you.

- Notice that attempts to change a situation often backfire—strengthening, rather than altering, how the situation occurs. Remember: Whatever you resist, persists.
- Consider: What if you could do something about how situations occur—to you and everyone around you? What impact would this make on everyone’s performance?

THE SECOND LAW OF PERFORMANCE

The second law of performance is: “How a situation occurs arises in language.” How situations occur is inseparable from language. We know of no bolder illustration of this fact than the case of Helen Keller, who had learned only a few words before she lost her sight and hearing to an illness when she was 18 months old. Seven years later, she learned sign language through her tutor, Anne Sullivan. How the world occurred to Keller once she learned language shifted more
dramatically than most of us can imagine. She saw language for what it is: a force that makes us human—that gives us a past and a future—that allows us to dream, to plan, to set and realize goals.

Language is the means through which your future is already written. It is also the means through which it can be rewritten. Language is used 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. We call this phenomenon the unsaid but communicated. Sometimes the sender is aware of the unsaid; often they are not. The unsaid is the most important part of language when it comes to elevating performance.

There is also an aspect of language that is unsaid and communicated without awareness. The unawareness aspect puts this part of language outside our control. Until we find leverage on this part of language, the future is written and can’t be altered. So, the process starts with becoming aware of what people aren’t saying but are communicating.

“Think about your racket,” the authors advise. “Can you see how the complaint might be a disguise for something deeper, such as a way of controlling a situation, or avoiding the domination of another person?”

People often look for performance gains in the wrong place: in trying to force conversations before making space for them. The way to make space is to leverage the fact that how situations occur arises in language—and, in fact, the key to performance lies in language. In particular, dampeners to performance live in the unsaid, especially in the unsaid and communicated without awareness.

There are specific actions leaders can take to tap into the power of the second law of performance:

• Become aware of your persistent complaints about people and situations. Notice that these cycle through your internal voice.
• Notice that these complaints are interpretations of facts, not facts themselves.
• See all four elements of rackets: the persistent complaint, the set way of behaving, the payoff and the cost. See your rackets at work. We all have them.
• Probe into the situation by writing down everything you need to say to others, including anything you need to say, anything you need to forgive or be forgiven for, anything you need to take responsibility for, or anything you need to give up (including the complaint itself).
• Communicate what you discover to others in your work and life. Many people find that this action has a dramatic impact on performance.

### THE THIRD LAW OF PERFORMANCE

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. It’s 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.

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.

You can see the power of the future in the question, Does money make you happy? Most people say no, but the answer is more complicated. Take two families. One made $200,000 last year; the second, $50,000. Next year, both expect to earn $100,000. The first will be unhappy, and the second, happy. It’s not the actual money you have today that makes you happy or unhappy. It’s the money you expect you’ll have, believe you’ll have, hope you’ll have or fear you’ll have that shapes your experience of money right now. The first family will cut back, maybe sell their home. The second family will buy a bigger home, take a vacation and buy a new car.

A universal principle becomes clear in this example: People live into the future they see coming at them, not the actual future they’ll get to someday. Unless people have
done something radical to alter their course, the future they are living into is their default future. By default future we don’t mean the inevitable future, but rather what is going to happen in our experience whether we give it much thought or not.

Our default future consists of our expectations, fears, hopes and predictions, all of which are ultimately based on our experience in the past. The default future is a projection of what happened in the past, all told through descriptive language. Without generative language, people attempt to fight the future, paradoxically making it even more likely. Remember: Whatever we resist, persists. Unless we do something—something other than fighting the future we see coming—it becomes the default setting.

Future-based language projects a new future that replaces what people see coming. It doesn’t modify the default future; it replaces it. There are a few specific actions leaders can take to construct a future that causes themselves and others to live into it:

1. Commit to the discipline of completing any issue that surfaces as incomplete. (To complete means moving an incident from the default future to the past.)
2. Articulate the default future: What is the past telling you will happen?
3. Ask, Do we really want this default future?
4. If not, begin to speculate with others on what future would (a) inspire action for everyone, (b) address the concerns of everyone involved, and (c) be real in the moment of speaking.
5. As you find people who are not aligned with the future, ask, What is your counterproposal?
6. Keep working until people align—when they say, “This speaks for me!” and they commit to it.

REWRITING THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP

The kind of leadership that arises from the Three Laws of Performance has the power to rewrite the future of a group, an organization, perhaps a country. The result of such efforts is remarkable success with the effect of creating leaders who act as catalysts, with people around the leader feeling they did the work themselves.

Each of the Three Laws of Performance has a message for leaders. Each has a leadership corollary that guides what leaders do and, more important, shapes who they are for others. Just as scientists and engineers use the laws of physics to send a rocket to the moon, leaders can use the Three Laws to elevate performance even in situations that seem impossible.

Leadership Corollary 1

Leaders have a say, and give others a say, in how situations occur.

Most readers of this book are looking for radical elevations in performance in their organizations, going beyond fixing what’s wrong or making things incrementally better. Leaders who empower others to rewrite and realize the future can transform any situation, no matter how “impossible” it may seem.

As a leader, you can’t control or determine how situations occur for others, but you do have a say. Take a moment and ask these questions:

- How can I interact with others so that situations occur more empowering to them?
- What processes, dialogues or meetings can I arrange so that people can feel like co-authors of a new future, not merely recipients of others’ decisions?

Leadership Corollary 2

Leaders master the conversational environment.

The levers and pulleys that make even impossible situations malleable live in the conversations that exist or can exist in an organization. Conversations produce innovations. Conversations are the vehicle for delivery of services. Conversations coordinate activities.

There are two elements that the conversational environment needs to include to achieve breakthrough performance. The first is an ongoing and companywide commitment to resolving any and all incompletions. The result is an organizationwide “blank space” into which a new future can be created. Take a moment and reflect on the conversational environment in your business and life. Specifically, you might ask:

- What decisions from the past are in my future?
- How do the people around me relate to their world? Do they honor their word? Do I honor my word?
- How can I start new conversations that make integrity vibrant for others and myself?
**Leadership Corollary 3**

Leaders listen for the future of their organization.

Leaders listen for the future in the same way a physician searches for an effective diagnosis. The doctor examines the patient, blood work, X-rays and history of present illness and reviews all the information. The leader looks at the present situation from a number of different perspectives, taking into account such aspects as finances, products, market position, competition, culture and aspirations of employees.

A leader who taps into the Three Laws listens for a future that will transform everything in the present. A leader listens for a future that is not predictable, probable, linear and was not going to happen anyway, and which compels inspired action.

**MASTERING THE GAME OF PERFORMANCE**

Most of us live a “thrown” life—thrown like dice—finding ourselves caught up in the situations of our lives, but never really calling the shots.

If we take on this challenge of self-invention, we will find ourselves walking down an unfamiliar road. Rather than being led by what has been important to us in the past, we will find ourselves “being” what we are committed to, what we are standing for, what our vision is.

In all of our lives, there are moments when we make critical decisions about ourselves that give us an overriding sense of who we are, not just in the present moment, but from then on.

The decisions that shape our lives live in a conversational environment that includes *There is something wrong here* and *Something is wrong with me*. See if you can recall those pivotal moments. If so, look and see what decision you made to deal with these kinds of situations in the future: a decision specifically about being a certain way, now and in the future, a way you could be that would produce results and make up for what’s wrong about you.

The decisions we make that deal with what’s wrong about us form the basis of our persona—who we consider ourselves to be. These kinds of decisions are life-altering. It is as if you are at a trial, and the trial is about how well you are dealing with life. You are playing three roles at the same time: the accused, the jury and the judge. The sentence you make is the decision you make about how to deal with the future in a way that makes up for what is lacking in who you are. The life sentence works exactly according to the design: It helps you survive and gives you a pathway to achieve success.

Many leadership-development approaches build on the attributes of the persona we created in that moment of stress and survival by virtue of life sentences. But let’s take a hard look at this approach. What happens if we build our leadership on top of these life sentences? At best, it’s limited and inauthentic, a persona hiding what we believe to be the real truth about ourselves.

The good news about the life sentence is that you aren’t just the accused, the judge and the jury. You can also be the court of appeals. You can reverse the conviction and release yourself from the prison of limitations. The bad news is that there is serious work to be done.

Here is a list of questions that will support you in finding the incident to work with and then to uncover the script that led to your life sentence:

1. How do you want people to describe you (for example, smart, funny, articulate)?
2. When did you decide to be this way? Did you have a moment when you realized, *Something’s wrong here*? Can you recall a moment when you said to yourself, *Something’s wrong with me*? What happened in that moment?
3. What decision did you make in that moment about how you would act in the future?
4. As in a court case, motive is important. What was your motive—your intent—in making that decision and in forming a persona? Was it to survive? To look good? To avoid looking bad? Or something else?

Notice how this persona or identity developed. It probably felt like you were just accepting reality. But, in fact, you were actually responding to how that situation occurred to you and how you occurred to yourself. You then created a new role to play in the future.

Once the life sentence is revealed for what it is—a decision about how to be in the future, albeit made under a moment of stress—you have a choice. Only when you see that it was you who made these decisions and judgments about and on yourself can you then overturn the life sentence.

Extraordinary leadership emerges from the following question: “If I’m not that persona, who am I, really?”
The Three Laws of Performance

CONCLUSION

Commit to seeing the situation as it is, without the problem-solution mass. If there’s any bit of I’ve tried this… or This is really hard, move those judgments out. See the situation without solutions, without any sense that it’s a problem.

In working with thousands of people on implementing the Three Laws, we have identified seven specific commitments that, when made with integrity, reliably break the performance barrier.

Our last piece of advice is this: Take on these commitments and let them guide you in the conversations you have with others.

Commitment 1: Get out of the stands. Communicate in a way that drives action. Make yourself accountable for winning the game.

Commitment 2: Create a new game. Use future-based language and declare what’s important.

Commitment 3: Make the obstacles the conditions of the game.

Commitment 4: Share your insights. The more you share your experience with the Three Laws, the more your experience deepens, your insights take hold and your capacity to achieve breakthrough results increases.

Commitment 5: Find the right coaching.

Commitment 6: Start filing your past in your past.

Commitment 7: Play the game as if your life depended on it. There are no circumstances in business or in life that you can’t handle from the Three Laws.

About the Authors

Steve Zaffron, CEO of the Vanto Group, provides consulting worldwide to help organizations and corporations increase performance. He has assisted more than 300 organizations, including dozens of Fortune 500 companies, in 20 countries overhaul their way of doing business. His clients have included Apple, Northrop Grumman and GlaxoSmithKline.

Dave Logan teaches at the Marshall School of Business at the University of California and is also co-founder and senior partner of CultureSync, a management consulting firm, which has provided services to Intel, Charles Schwab and American Express.

Logan has authored three books, including co-authorship of the critically acclaimed Tribal Leadership.