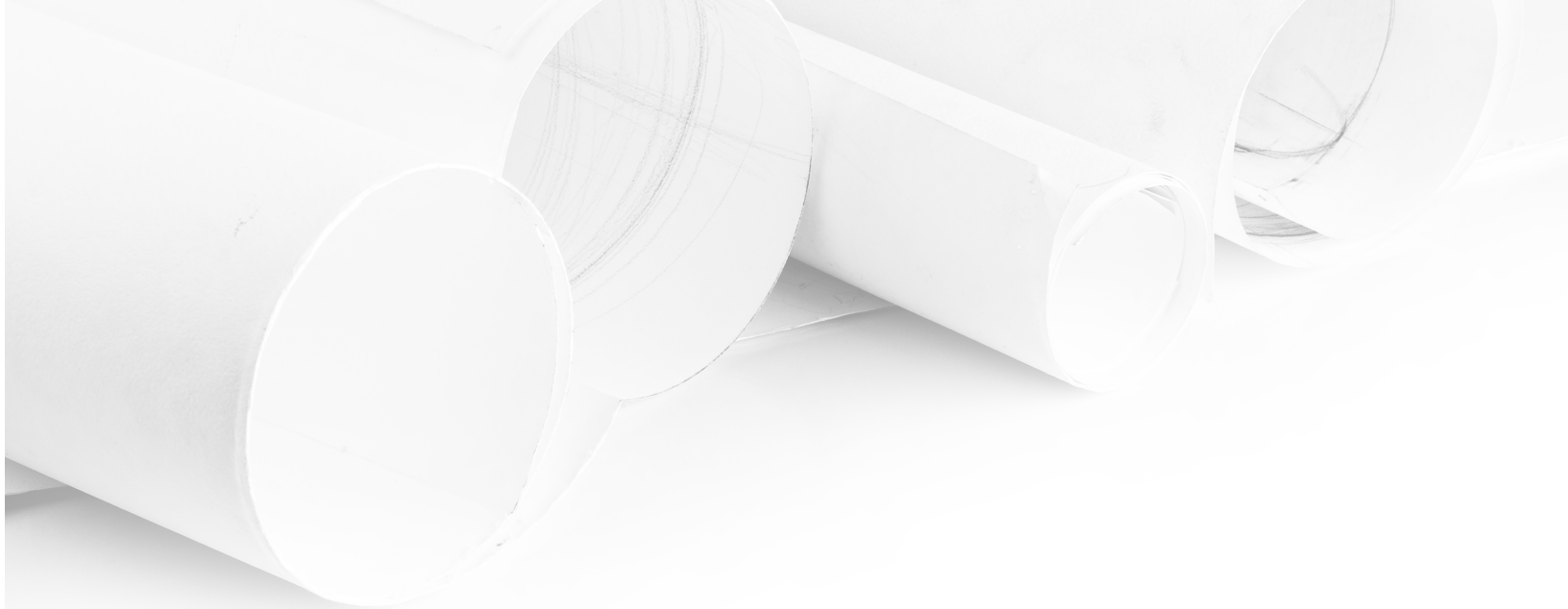# the three laws

of performance

discussion guide

By Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan

A Blueprint for Conversations
that Cause **Breakthroughs**

introduction

We've found that people who create breakthrough performance in their organizations and their lives lead conversations that follow a particular blueprint. This guide focuses on that blueprint, which contains four processes:

1. Generating an Urgent Case for Action that will galvanize you and others.
2. Establishing the conversational environment needed for breakthrough performance.
3. Creating new levels of leadership for yourself and others as required by the Urgent Case for Action.
4. Rewriting the future.

In the pages that follow, as in the book, we will ask you to think in new ways, to examine your assumptions, and explore different ways of approaching situations. If you do, our promise to you is breakthrough performance in your organization and your life. These are not easy conversations to have, but they work. As Jacques Derrida wrote, "if things were simple, word would have gotten around."

As you work though this guide, it's helpful to have a notebook, or a computer file, to record your work, including commitments you make along the way.

This guide will lead you and others to apply The Three Laws of Performance, and the three Leadership Corollaries. For easy reference, these are reprinted below.

the three laws of performance

1 **How People Perform Correlates To How Situations Occur To Them**

Leadership Corollary: Leaders Have A Say, And Give Others A Say, In How Situations Occur

2 **How A Situation Occurs Arises In Language**

Leadership Corollary: Leaders Master The Conversational Environment

3 **Future-Based Language Transforms How Situations Occur To People**

Leadership Corollary: Leaders Listen For The Future Of Their Organization

process 1

Generating an Urgent Case for Action that will galvanize you and others.

You'll find it helpful to re-read chapter 3 before beginning this process.

The "Urgent Case for Action" answers a question that is always in the background: "why should we do anything new now?" This question is sometimes posed as: "why invest our time, and possibly money, in taking action now?"

Until this question is answered, you'll continue to drift in the direction you're going. An Urgent Case for Action is the foundation for doing something new, now.

The Urgent Case for Action emerges in the answers to the following questions:

- What is the default future of our department or organization?
- If we don't take action now, where will we end up?
- If we don't act now, what risks will be exposed to?
- If we don't act now, what opportunities will we miss?

While you may have a sense that something new needs to happen, the real power doesn't come in getting the "right answer," but in working as a team to articulate the Urgent Case for Action.

With your team, share your commitment for doing something new. Are they willing to create a commitment with you? If yes, the team is ready for the conversation to create the Urgent Case for Action.

Begin by choosing someone to act as the facilitator of the conversation that you're about to have. His or her job is to keep the team focused, and to capture what people say. It needs to be someone everyone on the team will empower to play this role.

A pathway for having team conversations that are focused and end up with alignment follows. Feel free to modify this flow for your use.

Using a computer screen, flipchart or a whiteboard, write at the top the words: "The Urgent Case for Action." The facilitator begins by asking the team to speculate on the questions listed at the start of this process, writing each idea on the board. (Note: speculations are a form of brainstorming. It's important to manage the conversation so that there are no "right," "wrong, "true" or "false" answers. This is a time to "test out" ideas.)

Once everyone has said everything they have to say in speculation, the facilitator starts a new section, labeled "Proposals." The facilitator then asks for proposals, which are committed statements, such as, "We propose that avoiding the risk of _____ is urgent" or "We propose that we act to seize this opportunity of _____ immediately." It's helpful here to be as specific as possible. Open yourselves up to talking with others from the commitment to find the most powerful proposals together. Really listen, as opposed to arguing for your ideas. Work together on the Urgent Case for Action, and keep going until each and every person says, "this speaks for me!" When this happens, you've reached a state of alignment.

When everyone in the team is aligned—that is, when the Urgent Case for Action occurs for everyone as compelling—make sure to save your work. We will refer to what you came up with as the "aligned upon Urgent Case for Action" in the rest of this guide.

Next, start a new section that is a list of people outside your team who need to be engaged in this conversation. This list should include stakeholders, decision makers and influencers. Add to the list the member of the team who will reach out to each person, and by when they'll have engaged him or her in the Urgent Case for Action.

The intent here is to engage others in seeing the way the future occurs as calling for something new. As this happens, people naturally mobilize around the need to rewrite the future.

pitfall

A pitfall in this process is **not staying focused around aligning on the Urgent Case for Action**. Symptoms of distraction include:

- Side comments
- Not listening keenly to people working through their issues (listening to others may actually resolve your or others' issues)
- Turning the conversation into a description about the issues, rather than a committed conversation to create the Urgent Case for Action

process 2

Establishing the conversational environment needed for breakthrough performance.

You'll find it helpful to re-read chapter 5 before beginning this process.

This process focuses the team on the conversational environment of both the team itself and on the organization. Having this conversational environment in place with a critical mass of people makes breakthrough performance possible.

As in process #1, someone should facilitate this conversation, starting by writing the aligned upon Urgent Case for Action on a computer screen, flipchart or a whiteboard. The facilitator should then divide the screen or board into two halves, labeled, "The Team" and "The Organization."

The facilitator then moves through the following two sets of questions, writing the team's answers to each on the screen or board:

Look at the conversational environment of the organization, from the perspective of the Urgent Case for Action.

The Conversational Environment of the Team

- From the perspective of our commit ments regarding the Urgent Case for Action, what conversations need to be ended? What new conversations need to be started? List these conversations and who is going to lead the process of starting or ending each. By when will this process be completed?

- What decisions from the past are in our default future?

- To what degree do we honor our word? Specifically, where do we not honor our word?

- To what degree are we incomplete with each other? Specifically, who is incomplete with whom, and about what? (All the steps to getting complete are in chapter 3.)

- What are we committed to regarding keeping the conversational environment "whole and complete?"

The Conversational Environment of the Organization

- What conversations need to be ended? What new conversations need to be started? List these conversations and who needs to lead the process of starting or ending each. By when will this process be completed?

- What decisions from the past are in the default future of the organization

- To what degree do people in the organization honor their word? Specifically, where do they not honor their word? What pathways can we invent to support others in honoring their word?

- To what degree are people in the organization incomplete with each other? Specifically, who is incomplete with whom, and about what? What pathways can we invent to get others complete?

- What are we committed to regarding keeping the conversational environment in the organization "whole and complete?"

pitfall

The pitfall is **becoming overwhelmed**. A symptom of this pitfall is that the team may try to deal with "how" to implement integrity and commitment before answering "what" and "where" it's missing. Once the team becomes clear on, and committed to, "what needs to happen," the "how to make it happen" will not be overwhelming.

Creating new levels of leadership for yourself and others as required by the Urgent Case for Action.

You'll find it helpful to re-read chapters 4 and 6 before beginning this process.

As you look at the aligned upon Urgent Case for Action, and consider how to engage others, you'll probably see that new actions are required of you: standing up for something, starting new conversations, and engaging others. The same holds for each member of the team.

This is the domain of leadership. From the perspective of The Three Laws of Performance, being a leader is not a matter of position or authority. Leadership can arise from anyone in an organization.

The next set of conversations will support each member in the team making commitments about being a leader. The process starts with the facilitator writing the aligned upon Urgent Case for Action on a computer screen, flipchart or a whiteboard. This statement is now the context that calls for new levels of leadership.

Have each person answer the following questions, starting with speculations. When the person shifts to making commitments, these should be written on the screen or whiteboard beside the person's name. The questions are:

- How do you occur to yourself with regard to providing leadership in the Urgent Case for Action? How would you need to occur to yourself to act as a powerful leader in this matter?
- What has stopped you before? What are the decisions, or life sentences, that are limiting your leadership?
- What commitments can you make that take you beyond your life sentences?

Examples of the kinds of leadership commitments people make are: "I give up the life sentence that I am _____", "I declare that I am committed to _____", "I move forward even when I experience fear or uncertainty," "I am open to other people's contributions," "I promise to listen to the way situations occur to others as valid," "I support people to see new futures," and "I invite open dialogue that resolves conflicts."

What's critical here is to create commitments that require you to shift how you occur to yourself. You are taking a stand for who you can be, rather than who you have been, leaving you inspired by what you can contribute.

The final part of the process is that every person gives their word to support each other in fulfilling on their commitments, and to accept the support of others on the team. This creates a condition of integrity around these commitments, which is necessary for rewriting the future.

pitfall

There are two pitfalls in this process:

- **Wandering from the Urgent Case for Action.** Leadership doesn't happen in a vacuum. The Urgent Case for Action is the basis to be courageous, bold, and unstoppable. Without the Urgent Case for Action, the focus on leadership can become self-centered.
- **Not being authentic.** These conversations require being direct and confronting issues we normally don't talk about. What's most important here is arriving at commitments that make a difference, rather than keeping things harmonious and friendly. Just as leaders listen for the future of their organization, the team listens for the leadership of each of its members. Until you can count on each and every member, you won't have the support that the Urgent Case for Action requires.

process 4

Rewriting the Future

You'll find it helpful to re-read chapter 7 before beginning this process.

Unlike the processes above, rewriting the future does not focus on questions, but rather, on a sequence of conversations. To be effective, these conversations require the foundation that's been created in the previous three processes.

The facilitator should start by again putting the aligned upon Urgent Case for Action on a computer screen, flipchart or a whiteboard, and then inviting the team members to:

- Make proposals about a future in which the Urgent Case for Action is not only resolved, but which inspires dramatically higher levels of performance.
- Use "future-based" language—that is, the language of declaration, commitment, and promises—as the way this future is expressed. For example: "we declare _____," "we stand for _____," and "we are committed to _____."
- Interact about the proposals. If someone doesn't align with a proposal, ask him or her for a counterproposal. The facilitator should ask the two people who are not aligned to interact until they align on a new proposal. Once they have aligned, again, ask who isn't aligned.
- Keep the interactions going until a new future arises that goes "clunk" for everyone. People will experience the sense that "this is it!" and will see a new purpose for their work, and for the organization, that they rally around. Keep going until this state of alignment happens.

At this point, we're often asked, "what if it doesn't go 'clunk'?" Consider that rewriting the future is a natural extension of deeply experiencing the Urgent Case for Action. If people merely understand the Urgent Case for Action, they will be unable to rewrite the future- and a new future won't go "clunk." You may need to go back to process #1 to make sure the Urgent Case for Action is vibrantly alive for people.

pitfall

The pitfall in this process is **listening from what you already know, and from your strongly held views**. Doing so will have the team repeating issues rather than creating something new. Also, listening from what we already know will limit what the team sees is possible.

Additional Coaching For A Team That Takes On Rewriting The Future

Before beginning this section, re-read chapter 8.

We know from having worked with thousands of people going through these processes that it is inevitable that you and the team will experience setbacks. The following points are our coaching for when you get knocked off your game:

- Recognize when you're stuck. The experience is being thwarted, stopped, or impeded in the fulfillment of your commitment to rewrite the future and enhance performance. Discuss this experience with others. Do no make them wrong if their experience is different from yours.

- Remember that every time you create a future beyond the default future, you create a gap between that future and the current circumstances. Setbacks are inevitable as you take actions to fill that gap. In other words, getting knocked off your game is part of the four processes in this guide.

- Instead of seeing the setback as something that's wrong, ask yourself and the team what's missing. It may be in the engagement of others in the Urgent Case for Action, or in the creation of alignment around rewriting the future. The indicator that you have found something useful is when you see promises that, if made and fulfilled, will turn the setback into a breakthrough.

- Make promises for new actions that transform the setback into a breakthrough. As with your work on the four processes, ask who is accountable for fulfillment of each promise, and by when.

For information about our business consulting services that apply The Three Laws of Performance in your organization, contact us at inquiry@threelaws.com.

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