COMMUNICATION

THINK IN THREES

BY FRED HASSAN

TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO, "I came, I saw, I conquered" came from Julius Caesar of Rome. Two hundred years ago "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" came from the U.S. Declaration of Independence. Today, people in large parts of the world start an event, such as a race, with "Ready, Set, Go!"

Why? Because the human brain is wired to process information in patterns, and the smallest, most easily memorized and most easily repeated pattern is a pattern of three elements. This makes the "Rule-of-Threes" a component of the toolkit for most executives, especially CEOs.

In my present role as board member and chairman of two companies, as well as in past roles as chairman and/or CEO of six companies—one large, one small and two mid-size—I've used this Rule-of-Threes to help bring clarity and order, even as the world becomes increasingly complex and turbulent.

Here are a few practical examples in my toolkit: As a board member, when I hear a presentation on a strategic plan, I ask, "What are the three levers that will really move the needle? What are the three potential plan-busters? And, what contingency mitigators do we have in place?" In assessing priorities for the company, I ask, "What are the three priorities that really matter, and how do we communicate those?"

In companies where I am the chairman, we use the Rule of Threes to very clearly indicate the individual behaviors and team behaviors we are looking for from our people.

The individual behaviors we value are: Passion, courage and tenacity.

People can contribute through their team behaviors to our high-performance culture by: being mindful, being likeable and rooting for the person next door.

In looking for potential successors to C-level jobs, we look for IQ, EQ and values.

We acknowledge that the "values" part is the hardest to assess. Being trustworthy is only part of "values." Three special questions we ask in assessing "values" are: "Will he do the right thing, even if it comes at a personal sacrifice?" If nobody says "thank

THE MOST COMMON REASON PEOPLE leave jobs is their boss—often because of low trust. The good news is that leaders can be intentional about building high-trust organizations. Based on nearly a half-century devoted to leading teams, I've frequently written and spoken about this topic. The thesis of the second edition of *T 10 La T* (HarperCollins, September 2019) is that by understanding the nature of trust, one can be intentional about building a high-trust brand, healing from a betrayal and building a culture that is more fun and delivers more predictable and durable results.

The first law of trust is integrity. The di erence between what a leader says and what she does is a "say-do gap" that, if allowed to persist, will not only destroy the trust others have in her as a leader but will infect the organization and begin to damage its brand. Closing this gap is easier said than done. Building trust is hard work. It happens one decision, one conversation and one promise fulfilled at a time.

Improvement starts with a leader asking, "Am I delivering the results others expect of me?" "Do I need to promise less or deliver more, as a starting point?" "Or some of both?" No spin allowed. Honestly assessing the current gap between expectations and reality is the starting point for laying the foundation for building a high-trust organization.

This can be a challenge unless the ground is adequately prepared. First, set the standard for people that the best ideas win. Demonstrate that great ideas come from less senior team members by giving the spotlight to unexpected contributors. This kind of celebration encourages people to come forward even if the feedback is unpleasant or unwelcome. In trust-poor enterprises that frown on debate or unvarnished feedback, the tranquil veneer of equanimity may reign, but it's the type of quiet that one might find at a hospital—just below the surface simmers a much worse kind of disease.

Early in my career, I developed a few mantras that I would repeat to remind myself of the changes I was trying to make in my "personal operating system"—the lens through which I saw people and problems. I may be the leader, but I won't confuse my identity with the organization's. I would repeat to myself the mantra, "It's about the mission, not about me." As I repeated these reminders, sometimes several times a day when faced with challenges, they became second nature to me. Eventually, I didn't need them anymore to react more predictably and appropriately to events.

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MOST OF US THINK OF "weakest link" as a negative expression; but it isn't necessarily. My first executive job taught me many lessons, one of which was that a weak link in an organization can be a sign of positive growth.

My responsibilities there covered a manufacturing arm structured around multi-year customer orders and a make-to-order shop that worked from order to order for many customers, some orders taking six days to produce, others six months. Just before my arrival, one of our top make-to-order customers decided to source its requirements elsewhere.

The shop immediately su ered. Job overruns spiked, which made no sense since labor was underutilized, quality slipped and so did deliveries; work tended to fill the time. In the eyes of others, the shop was now the weakest link! But was it?

From my perspective, the shop was not the weakest link; the sales department got that award. There was virtually no pipeline of pending orders to fill the gap created by the customer that had exited. And so began our journey—the process of strengthening the weakest link. The sales department re-energized, developed new customer targets and paid far more attention to those already on board, soon creating an abundance of opportunities needing to be estimated and priced.

The department was now the strongest link, and engineering, responsible for estimating and pricing, became the weakest link in that it couldn't keep up. Resources were added, and estimates, pricing and order input began to "hum" again. And—you guessed it—when the shop was at full throttle, if the backlog showed a major dip, the sales again became the weakest link.

Consider the opposite: a client retained me on the premise that his sales department needed corrective action. I spent a week or two looking at the metrics and then sat down with the president to give him the bad news. The sales department was not the weakest link!

In the prior three years, sales had grown an average of 5 percent but, over the same period, the company had lost about 10 percent of its customers. The customer losses were due to recurrent quality issues, and, as you might expect, the president knew that. So, manufacturing was the weakest link, and our focus turned to creating positive energy and positive results. The emerging cycle left targets of blame behind.

What's the point? A weak link isn't always a source of blame. The distinction could be earned by other links having gained in strength. If your organization is spiraling through growth and continuous improvement, it is highly unlikely that each link in the chain will be of equal strength. Some functions will run ahead only to find themselves behind as others progress.

Carry the message: if the enterprise is spiraling , let your team know that sometimes they'll lead the pack and other times they'll follow. You're an extraordinary executive if you're able to guide all functions at the same pace. If you're spiraling , e.g. 2008/9, the same is true but in reverse, namely the goal for all is to not replace others as the weakest link on the way , but rather to reverse course and strengthen the enterprise's links… one at a time.

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