



the three laws of performance

Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan

Reviewed by David Hanlon.

This is one of the books that I have found challenged me to look more deeply at my values and how they translate into organisational culture. It was a rewarding experience and I believe that many of you will have a similar experience. This is an area of disconnect that has been progressively examined by a number of influential authors who seek to help individuals create an “organisational soul” that has some resemblance to what most individuals and families aspire to in their personal lives, yet fail to achieve in the workplace. Authors whom I rate highly in this regard are Stephen Covey, Peter Senge and Chris Argyris. Far too often we separate what is OK for people as individuals as quite separate from what is OK for people as an organisation. Sir Mark Moody-Stuart, the former chairman of Royal Dutch Shell relates a protest outside his country home where, after giving the demonstrators lunch, they declared, “well, the problem’s not you, it’s Shell.” And his response was, “wait a minute, let’s talk about what is Shell. It’s made up of people like me.” Zaffron and Logan, using a lot of Landmark-like approaches, challenge us to confront the unspoken issues and have the sort of conversations Sir Mark had.

Landmark has been around a long time and has created significant transformation in millions of individuals globally, Steve Zaffron has been with Landmark a long time and heads up their commercial consulting arm, the Vanto Group. Dave Logan is a management academic and consultant. He is also the author of the management best seller, *Tribal Leadership*.

In my view, this book provides a sound corporate perspective of the tools and techniques used within Landmark. But it does go beyond Landmark.

In an age where we have commoditised conversations - we consult widely but don’t listen¹, we ask for input yet make decisions outside of that framework² - a good book on the relationship between organisational performance and language is a must-read; and Zaffron and Logan’s approach is to really work the conversations, to turn them upside down and dig beyond the words that are said to get to what’s really going on.

So when the series editor, Warren Bennis, a well known academic, author and business consultant, acknowledges that he was fascinated by Zaffron and Logan’s work, we sit up and take notice.

Bennis, in his editor’s note says, “I listened to them with equal amounts of wonder and skepticism.” Bennis was fascinated by “their gutsy aspiration to integrate an interdisciplinary slew of disciplines as disparate as brain science, linguistics, organisational theory, and complex adaptive systems with a few fundamental laws of human and organisational behavior that could lead to palpable and profound change in both domains.”

They call Zaffron the “Zen master in a business suit” and Logan has earned the nickname “Dr Phil to the Fortune 500.”

As you can guess, they have a different approach to working in the corporate world.

¹ Organising for successful change management: A McKinsey Global Survey (June 2006).

² Improving strategic planning: A McKinsey Survey (September 2007). 23 percent indicated that major strategic decisions were made within its confines.



Unlike many others, Bennis was able to put his skepticism aside and reviewed draft after draft to help mould what he says, "might be one of the most important books written in many years".

Structure of the book

The book is written in three parts.

Part 1: The three laws in action

1. Transforming an impossible situation
2. Where is the key to performance?
3. Rewriting a future that is already written

Part 2: Rewriting the future of leadership

4. With so many books on leadership, why are there so few leaders?
5. The Self-led organisation

Part 3: Mastering the game of performance

6. Who or what is leading your life?
7. The path to mastery
8. Breaking the performance barrier

What are the "three laws of performance"?

As indicated above part 1 takes these laws one at a time, demonstrates (with some great case studies) how to apply them and answers the question "Why do people do what they do?"

LAW 1: How people perform correlates to how situations occur to them

In a subtle way they move us beyond the more common way of saying "perception is reality". In using the word "occur" the authors, mean "something beyond perception and subjective experience".

So frequently, we forget that what we perceive is merely our own interpretation of a situation - we take it for granted that we directly perceive the reality itself. Other people's actions often seem to us to make no sense at all - yet they will be perfectly logical to that person, given the interpretation they have. Another way to say it is "There's what happens and what you make it mean."

"As counterintuitive as it may seem, most change efforts end up *reinforcing* how a situation occurs."

It's never what happens that upsets us – it's how we perceive what happens and how we judge what happens. It's the conversations we have with ourselves about what that means.

This law is backed with a wonderful example from Lonmin Plc. in South Africa where tensions were high and trust low. This case study is a great example, not just for changing organisational relationships, but for those involved working in cross-cultural situations.

In our gut, we know exactly what our default future is. Despite not liking it, we persist in perfecting it!



LAW 2: How a situation occurs, arises in language

In this law the authors take us on a far more inward journey to increase first our awareness of "the unsaid but communicated without awareness". This becomes linguistic clutter and Zaffron and Logan demonstrate how, if allowed to build, allows "no space to create anything new."

Moving from the unsaid to the said leads to one of the Landmark tools: rackets.

Having been exposed to rackets in a Landmark seminar nearly 10 years ago, I have always been impressed with the power of recognising them.

A racket has four elements:

1. A consistent complaint (he's late again).
2. A pattern of behaviour that goes with the complaint (irritated, aloof).
3. We can generally recognize these two.
4. Pay-off to the complaint (I am right, I can avoid domination).
5. Cost of the complaint (reduced effectiveness of the relationship).

These latter two live in the unsaid and unaware.

The destructive power of a racket is the accumulation of unsaid, unaware clutter that prevents us from creating new things. Forgiving or taking responsibility for our rackets is the only step to elimination.

The interview Bill Clinton did with Nelson Mandela (sidebar) shows how this great man effectively dealt with a racket. Zaffron and Logan provide a similar example of a survivor of the Holocaust in letting go by addressing the four elements above.

LAW 3: Future-based language transforms how situations occur to people

To comprehend this law, we need to understand the fundamental difference between two ways of using language: descriptive and generative.

- **Descriptive language** describes the world as it is. It looks back, spots trends and is used to predict what will happen.
- **Generative language** (or Future-based language) by comparison, doesn't describe how a situation occurs, it *transforms* how it occurs.

Are you beginning to see why Warren Bennis was listening with wonder and skepticism?

What are the conditions for future-based language?

In drawing an analogy with creating a painting (starting with a blank canvas), Zaffron and Logan postulate there are three conditions.

About Mandela

"Years ago I asked him this about the day of his release: 'You were a great man, you invited your jailers to your inauguration....but tell me the truth. Weren't you really angry all over again?' And he said, 'Yes, I was angry. And I was a little afraid. But when I felt that anger well up inside of me I realised that if I hated them after I got outside of that gate, then they would still have me. And he smiled and said, 'I wanted to be free so I let it go.'"

It was an astonishing moment in my life. It changed me."



1. Recognise what binds and constrains us is not facts, it's language – in particular, descriptive language.
2. Agreeing on the default frame for the future and asking – is this really what we want?
3. Completing issues from the past (this, they suggest, goes well beyond getting closure).

Having postulated, with great case studies, the authors suggest **three leadership corollary laws**.

These are:

1. Leaders have a say, and give others a say, in how situations occur.
2. Leaders master the conversational environment.
3. Leaders listen for the future of their organisation.

The self-led organisation

One of the transformations Zaffron and Logan talk about is the rise of corporations as individuals.

Citing the documentary, *The Corporation*, where the question was posed early in the film: "If a corporation is a person, what type of person is it?" The documentary then goes on to show that corporations often demonstrate:

- A callous unconcern for the feelings of others
- An incapacity to maintain enduring relationships
- A reckless disregard for the safety of others
- Deceitfulness: repeated lying and conning of others for profit
- An incapacity to experience guilt
- A failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviours.

Whilst clearly not a true representation of many organisations, the list is an interesting one for every organisation to check how they respond to the general areas under stress.

Peter Block, a respected leadership consultant, posed and then provided an answer to this question:

"Can a collective organism like an organisation have a purpose, other than growth, and can it bring something into the world that didn't exist before?"

His answer:

Probably yes, but went on to say that a vision for organisations would make a difference. However, despite the efforts by experts such as Margaret Wheatley, Chris Argyris and Peter Senge, it has not been possible to institutionalise such a vision. So it remains elusive.

Interestingly Zaffron and Logan raise the question of a medical doctor turned management consultant Halee Fischer-Wright who asked: "why there is no Hippocratic Oath of Management?"



Who or what is leading your life?

Again giving us some of the more classic Landmark tools, we are challenged to identify the moments in life that cause us to make critical decisions about ourselves. These "defining moments" set the scene for the rest of our life.

Zaffron and Logan share some especially interesting insights about "taking on some deep work - the kind of work that needs to be done for us to be leaders in our lives. And we really mean being a leader in all respects of our lives, including at work, in relationships, with family, with community, even with all of society."

Creating a crisis of authenticity

Here we are challenged to confront what really matters: what they call the crisis of the real you against the persona and the life sentence. Using a great parable (see sidebar), Zaffron and Logan remind us: we feed only what we value.

Breaking the performance barrier

Zaffron and Logan suggest 7 commitments to action.

1. Get out of the stand
2. Create a new game
3. Make obstacles part of the game
4. Share your insights
5. Find the right coaching
6. Start filing your past in your past
7. Play the game as if your life depended on it.

For example, commit to creating a new game by declaring that something is important. "That is what you are putting at stake, and it is what you are holding yourself accountable to. When others commit to the [new] game with you, they join you on the field."

This is what Jim Collins and Jerry Porras have in mind when advocating that an organisation commit to what they call a Big Hairy Audacious Goal. As they explain in *Built to Last*, it is "a huge and daunting goal - like a big mountain to climb. It is clear, compelling, and people 'get it' right away. A BHAG serves as a unifying focal point, galvanizing people and creating team spirit as people strive toward a finish line...a BHAG captures the imagination and grabs people in the gut...Indeed, when you combine quiet understanding with the audacity of a BHAG, you get a powerful, almost magical mix."

Summary

In essence Zaffron and Logan are providing guidance to leaders on how to transform organisational conversations so that the whole organisation moves in unity toward what Jim Collins described in *Good to Great* as the organisation's hedgehog principle.

An old Cherokee chief is teaching his grandson about life:

"A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves.

One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt and ego.

The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.

This same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person too."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"



And finally, the endorsement from Bishop Desmond Tutu: "God invites each of us to participate in the process of transforming the world - to create a world in which every person knows their infinite and irreplaceable worth and can truly fulfill their potential. This book is filled with insights, real-life encounters and experiences, shows us how we may do this work of transformation. Applicable in the corporate, labour, political and civil society sectors - Steve and David have written an inspiring, practical book that will assist all who seek to rewrite the future of our world."

Availability

The three laws of performance is available in good bookstores, on-line and also in audible form (www.audible.com).

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