

LIVING INTO A CHOSEN FUTURE:

FACING INTO PATTERNS THAT PREVENT CHANGE

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THE FUTURE WE'RE ALREADY LIVING INTO

We declare a new future. We articulate a compelling vision, establish commitments, and begin planning and taking action toward what we hope to create.

Yet despite our best intentions, familiar patterns reappear. The changes we envision prove difficult to sustain. We may find ourselves recreating the very circumstances we intended to change. Why? Perhaps because we are attempting to create a new future while continuing to live inside an old one.

Alongside the future we consciously envision is another future we are already living into, often without realizing it. This is the future shaped by our experiences, assumptions, expectations, disappointments, and the conclusions we have drawn about ourselves, other people, and how the world works. It influences what we notice, what we believe is possible, how we interpret the actions of others, and the choices we make.

In *The Three Laws of Performance*, Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan call this our "default future." It is not necessarily the future we want. It is the future we have come to expect. And unless we become aware of it, we may continue to recreate it, even as we work diligently to bring about something different.

Declaring a new future can be a powerful beginning. But what else must happen for that future to become more than an inspiring vision or a distant promise?

THE FUTURE HIDDEN IN OUR PRESENT

Consider a leader who wants to build a more empowered, accountable team. She genuinely believes in developing others. She wants her colleagues to exercise initiative, make decisions, and take greater ownership of their work. Yet she finds herself repeatedly stepping in, correcting mistakes, and taking responsibility for decisions that others could make. She may tell herself that she simply has high standards, that people need more development, or that the demands of the business leave little room for error.

Perhaps all of these things are true. But beneath them may be an expectation she has never fully examined: *If I don't stay on top of everything, things will fall apart.*

That expectation is more than a passing thought. It shapes how situations occur to her.

When a colleague encounters difficulty, she sees a problem requiring her intervention rather than an opportunity for someone else's growth. When someone approaches a task differently, she sees a potential failure rather than a legitimate alternative. When she delegates, she remains watchful, anticipating the moment she may need to step back in. Her behavior makes sense within the future she expects. And the



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more she intervenes, the fewer opportunities others have to develop the very capabilities she wants them to demonstrate. Over time, the team may become increasingly dependent on her. The future she was trying to prevent becomes the future she helps create.

This is one of the paradoxes of human behavior: We can become so committed to avoiding an unwanted future that our efforts to prevent it help bring it about. The question is not simply what this leader needs to do differently. It is what she has come to believe about herself, others, and the future—and whether those beliefs still deserve to guide her choices.

PATTERNS THAT KEEP US WHERE WE ARE

Our default futures are sustained by more than expectations. They are also reinforced by familiar patterns of thought, conversation, and behavior. One particularly revealing pattern is what Zaffron and Logan call a "racket." In this context, a racket is not simply a complaint. It is a recurring complaint accompanied by a predictable way of behaving, an often-unrecognized payoff, and a cost.

Consider a leader who repeatedly complains that colleagues are unwilling to collaborate. Perhaps the complaint is justified. There may indeed be significant obstacles to collaboration. Yet notice what happens when the leader enters a meeting already expecting resistance. He may listen selectively, become defensive, withhold information, or dismiss suggestions before exploring them. When the meeting ends without meaningful progress, he has further evidence that his colleagues are unwilling to collaborate. His complaint has been reinforced. What might he be gaining from this pattern?

Perhaps the satisfaction of being right. Perhaps protection from disappointment. Perhaps relief from having to examine his own contribution to the relationship or risk a different kind of conversation. These are the payoffs. And what are the costs? Diminished trust and connection. Reduced influence. Missed opportunities for shared learning and accomplishment.

Notice how the pattern reinforces itself. The leader expects resistance, behaves in ways that may invite it, and then interprets the resulting experience as confirmation of what he already believed. His expectations shape his actions, and his actions help perpetuate the future he has come to expect. What appears to be an unchanging reality may be, at least in part, a pattern that he is unknowingly helping to sustain. Sometimes the payoff is not something we consciously want or enjoy. It can be the temporary security of remaining within a familiar way of understanding ourselves and the world.

The important distinction is that the complaint may contain legitimate concerns while the pattern surrounding it continues to limit what is possible. Recognizing a racket does not require us to deny reality, excuse unacceptable behavior, or assume responsibility for circumstances beyond our control. It invites us to examine our relationship to those circumstances.

- What do we repeatedly tell ourselves about this situation?
- How do we behave when we believe that story?
- What might we be protecting ourselves from?
- And what are the costs of continuing?

These questions can be uncomfortable. They can also be profoundly liberating. When we recognize that a familiar response is a pattern rather than an inevitability, we create room for choice.

WHAT ARE WE PROTECTING?

There may be another, more personal dimension to these patterns. Our familiar ways of responding to difficult situations often developed for good reasons. They may have helped us feel competent, accepted, respected, secure, or in control. Over time, these strategies can become so familiar that we experience them not as choices, but as essential aspects of who we are.

The leader who feels compelled to have all the answers may be protecting a sense of personal worth that has become closely tied to being knowledgeable. The colleague who avoids disagreement may be protecting a sense of belonging. The person who habitually challenges others may be protecting against the possibility of being controlled or dismissed.

Each strategy may have served an intelligent and important purpose. Yet when we feel compelled to rely on it, regardless of the circumstances, it can begin to limit our freedom, our relationships, and our capacity to respond creatively.

This invites a deeper kind of inquiry. Not simply, "What am I getting out of this pattern?" But also,

- "What feels at risk if I let it go?"
- "What have I come to believe about myself that makes this response seem necessary?"
- "Who might I be, and what might become possible, if I no longer needed to protect myself in this particular way?"

These questions call for more than intellectual insight. They invite us to meet ourselves with honesty, compassion, and the courage to reconsider assumptions that may have shaped our lives for years. We do not need to reject the person we have been in order to grow. We need to become more conscious of the choices available to us.

WHAT REMAINS UNSPOKEN

Much of what shapes our relationships is never explicitly discussed. A team may speak enthusiastically about collaboration while privately expecting that important decisions will continue to be made by a select few. A leader may invite candid feedback while communicating, through tone, body language, or past reactions, that disagreement is unwelcome. Colleagues may express commitment to a new direction while privately assuming that this initiative, like others before it, will eventually be abandoned.

These unspoken expectations influence how people listen, what they say, what they withhold, and how fully they participate. They become part of the team's conversational environment. And because they remain largely unexamined, people may experience the resulting behaviors as confirmation that their assumptions were correct.

A team that expects its members to protect their own interests may become increasingly guarded. A leader who expects resistance may inadvertently create it. A person who expects to be overlooked may stop offering contributions that others would have welcomed.

We do not all experience the same situation in the same way. How a situation “occurs” for us depends on what we bring to it: our different histories, perspectives, concerns, and understandings of what is at stake. This is why meaningful change requires more than communicating a new strategy or asking people to adopt new behaviors. It requires creating conversations in which people can explore how the situation actually occurs to them.

- What are we assuming?
- What have we stopped talking about?
- What disappointments or unresolved experiences continue to shape our expectations?
- What do we each see that others may not see?
- What might become possible if we could bring these different perspectives into conversation with curiosity rather than judgment?

Such conversations require care, courage, and a willingness to listen beyond what we already believe. They also require leaders to examine their own assumptions, not just invite others to examine theirs.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

Recognizing our patterns is one thing. Becoming willing and able to change them is another. We may understand that our need for control is limiting others yet feel profoundly uncomfortable when we relinquish it. We may recognize that our reluctance to speak candidly is undermining trust yet continue to anticipate rejection or disapproval when we consider expressing ourselves more openly. We may see how our assumptions about colleagues are constraining our relationships yet find ourselves returning to those assumptions the moment a familiar difficulty arises.

Insight does not automatically dissolve the fears, habits, or expectations that sustain our behavior.

Sometimes the greatest challenge is not recognizing a pattern but allowing ourselves to experience the uncertainty that comes with changing it. When our sense of competence, belonging, or worth has become closely tied to a familiar way of behaving, doing something different may feel surprisingly threatening. We may understand that we no longer need to prove ourselves by having all the answers yet feel exposed when we admit that we do not know. We may recognize the value of allowing others greater autonomy yet experience considerable discomfort when we relinquish control.

Developing the capacity to remain present with that discomfort, without immediately retreating into familiar defenses, is part of the deeper work of change. So is learning to examine ourselves with compassion rather than judgment. We can acknowledge the impact of our behavior without condemning ourselves for having developed it. We can recognize the limitations of an old strategy while appreciating the purposes it once served.

This combination of honesty and care creates greater room for choice.

Meaningful change requires us to develop the capacity to notice our familiar responses as they arise, remain present with the discomfort of doing something different, and make more conscious choices about how we wish to respond. It also requires conditions in which honest exploration becomes possible.

When people expect to be judged, dismissed, or punished for acknowledging uncertainty, they have good reason to protect themselves. When they experience respect, genuine curiosity, and a willingness to listen, they have greater room to question assumptions, acknowledge their contributions to difficult situations, and explore new possibilities. This is why the quality of our conversations matters so profoundly.

A conversation can reinforce an existing pattern or create an opening for something different. We can listen to defend our position or listen to discover what we have not yet understood. We can approach disagreement as a threat to our authority or as an opportunity to broaden our perspective. We can respond to a mistake by assigning blame or by combining accountability with curiosity about what happened and what can be learned. Each response helps shape the conditions in which people participate, learn, and grow. Those conditions influence which futures become possible.

We have a responsibility to examine how our own assumptions, reactions, and behaviors affect the willingness of others to contribute. We can create greater room for candor by acknowledging our own uncertainty, inviting perspectives that differ from ours, responding constructively to difficult feedback, and honoring the trust others place in us. We can also recognize that not every concern can be resolved through conversation alone. Genuine safety and trust require consistency between what we say, what we do, and the systems and practices through which people experience our leadership.

When our actions and organizational practices continue to reinforce the default future, even the most compelling invitation to create something different may be met with understandable skepticism or cynicism. People need to experience credible evidence of that evolving future in how we lead, make decisions, honor commitments, and work together—not simply hear us describe it.

FROM A DEFAULT FUTURE TO A CHOSEN FUTURE

Developing a richer, more differentiated understanding of the future we are already living into—individually and together—opens the possibility of choosing differently. Yet awareness alone does not bring about change. We must also ask what future we want to create—and what we are willing to practice, individually and together, to bring it about.

- Instead of asking only, "How do we fix what isn't working?" we can ask: "What would we love to make possible?"
- Instead of asking, "How do I get people to become more accountable?" a leader might ask: "What kind of environment would invite people to take genuine ownership of their work?"
- Instead of asking, "How do I stop being disappointed by others?" we might ask: "What relationships do I want to cultivate, and how do I want to show up in them?"

These are not merely different ways of describing the same problems. They invite us to orient ourselves toward a different future.

A leader who is committed to developing a capable, self-directed team can begin to see moments of uncertainty as opportunities for learning rather than threats to performance. A team committed to mutual trust can begin to treat disagreement as an opportunity to deepen understanding rather than evidence of division. A person committed to greater authenticity can begin to notice where the desire for approval has been shaping their choices—and experiment with speaking and acting from a more grounded sense of self.

None of this eliminates the challenges, constraints, or legitimate risks of our circumstances. A chosen future becomes meaningful through the commitments we make, the conversations we engage in with creativity and courage, and the skillful actions through which we bring it into being.

It is not enough to say that we want trust. We must behave in ways that make trust possible. It is not enough to say that we value accountability. We must honor our commitments and address what happens when we do not. It is not enough to say that we want people to feel empowered. We must be willing to share influence, welcome different perspectives, and make room for others to contribute. The future we choose must become visible in how we live and lead today.

BECOMING THE AUTHORS OF OUR FUTURE

Perhaps the deepest opportunity in this work is not simply to improve our performance, but to examine the identity from which our performance arises.

- Who have we learned to be?
- What roles have we assumed, perhaps long after they ceased to serve us?
- What have we decided we must do to be valued, respected, safe, or successful?

Some of these patterns may have served us extraordinarily well. The person who learned to be indispensable may have become a highly accomplished leader. The person who learned to avoid conflict may have developed exceptional sensitivity to others. The person who learned to rely on personal achievement may have developed remarkable discipline and expertise. Yet strengths that once helped us succeed can also become limitations when we feel compelled to rely on them, regardless of the situation.

The invitation is not to reject who we have been. It is to recognize that we are more than the strategies we have learned. We can appreciate the intelligence and resourcefulness of our earlier choices while becoming more discerning about whether those choices continue to serve what matters most. We can retain what is essential about our strengths without remaining confined by them. We can create a future that is not merely a more successful version of our past, but a fuller expression of who we are becoming.

For leaders, this work begins with “self” but also has a collective dimension.

We are not the sole authors of the future. Our choices affect others, and their perspectives, contributions, and commitments shape what becomes possible for all of us. Leadership, then, is not simply the capacity to articulate a compelling vision. It requires the capacity to create an environment in which people examine

their assumptions, speak honestly, honor their commitments, and participate meaningfully in creating a future they care about. A future that invites their contribution rather than merely requiring their compliance. A future that honors both individual agency and shared responsibility. A future worth living into.

THE PRACTICE OF BECOMING

Opening a new future may begin with a moment of insight or a compelling declaration. Bringing that future into being requires ongoing practice: becoming more aware of the assumptions we carry, the choices we make, and the impact we have on others. Even when we recognize our default future and sincerely commit to something different, the moment we encounter familiar pressure, disappointment, uncertainty, or conflict, our old responses may reappear. This does not necessarily mean that our commitment was insincere or that our efforts have failed. We may be encountering the very patterns we are learning to change.

Each such moment offers an opportunity to practice.

- We can learn to recognize the early signs of our familiar responses—not only in our thoughts, but also in our emotions, physical sensations, and impulses to act.
- We may notice ourselves becoming tense, impatient, defensive, or unusually eager to regain control. We may feel the urge to withdraw, seek approval, prove a point, or make a difficult situation disappear.

These are valuable signals. They invite us to pause, sense into and recognize what is happening, consider what matters most, and choose how we wish to respond rather than react reflexively:

- What story am I telling myself?
- What am I anticipating or protecting against?
- What else might be true?
- How do I want to show up in this moment?
- What response would be more consistent with the future I am committed to creating?

Consider our leader who wants to develop a more empowered team. When a colleague approaches a task differently than she would, she notices her impulse to intervene. Rather than immediately correcting the approach, she pauses, recognizes her familiar expectation that things will fall apart without her oversight, and becomes curious. She asks a question, listens, and allows her colleague room to exercise judgment. She remains available for support without automatically taking control. In that moment, she is doing more than practicing a new behavior. She is beginning to live into a different future.

With practice, we can develop greater capacity to remain present, grounded, and responsive even when circumstances activate our familiar defenses. We can learn to listen when we feel defensive, remain curious when we feel certain, and engage constructively when we would rather withdraw or take control. Over time, these choices can become less effortful, more congruent and embodied, and more deeply integrated into how we live, relate, and lead.

Sustaining these practices asks us to honor our commitments, acknowledge our missteps, repair what we can, and continue learning. It also asks us to create relationships and environments in which others can do the same.

In the process, we become more fully ourselves—not confined by the interpretations and strategies of our past, but increasingly able to respond to the opportunities, challenges, and possibilities of the present. We develop greater awareness, freedom, and responsibility for how we choose to live and lead. We become more intentional in our choices and more skillful in creating the conditions for others to contribute.

The future we create is shaped not only by what we envision, but by who we are becoming as we bring that vision into being. Declaring a new future opens possibility; our individual and collective practices develop the capacity to live into it. Our most meaningful transformation lies in that ongoing process of becoming.

AN INVITATION TO REFLECT

Consider a situation in your work, leadership, or relationships where meaningful change has remained elusive.

- If nothing fundamentally changes, what future do you expect? What are you already assuming will happen?
- What recurring complaints or familiar stories may be reinforcing that expectation? What might they be protecting, and what might they be costing you or others?
- What have you come to believe about yourself or others that makes your familiar responses seem necessary? What might become possible if those assumptions no longer governed your choices?
- What conversations have been missing, avoided, or left unfinished? What conditions would make greater honesty, openness, and mutual understanding possible?
- What future would you genuinely want to create instead? What matters enough to make that future worth pursuing?
- What commitment, conversation, or action could begin to make that future real today? When familiar pressures or patterns reappear, how might you recognize them, remain present, and choose a response consistent with the future you are creating?

CONCEPTUAL INSPIRATION: Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan, *The Three Laws of Performance: Rewriting the Future of Your Organization and Your Life*. Additional influences include Will Schutz's *Human Element*, Judith E. Glaser's *Conversational Intelligence*, and the Leadership Circle's developmental framework.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beata C. Lewis, JD, MSC, PCC is an executive coach and systems practitioner with over 25 years of experience partnering with senior leaders and leadership teams navigating complexity, conflict, and meaningful change. Her work integrates systemic team coaching with somatic and embodied leadership practices, alongside complexity-aware approaches to collaboration, trust, and decision-making. Certified as a Master Somatic Coach™ since 2003 and influenced by a rich embodied leadership lineage, Beata supports leaders in cultivating presence, integrity, and reliable action under pressure—especially when no single right answer exists. She is known for her grounded presence, discerning insight, and her ability to help individuals and teams engage tension as a source of learning, coherence, and forward movement.