



The Magic Three

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Background

I've always been a fan of the number 3 and one day it came to my rescue. I was filling in as a facilitator for a colleague of mine. It was early in my career and, not being familiar with the workshop's materials, I was at a loss as to what to do with the group. There were two hours left on the clock and we were ready to go into the workshop's last exercise, which was supposed to last ten minutes. I began to panic. My colleague had warned me not to end the session early. I decided to ad lib and modify the directions of the exercise. The exercise called for participants to share with partners an experience from their past that would be different today if they applied the communication principles we had learned during the course. I put people into groups of four and instructed them to share three experiences instead of one. Something very unexpected and magical happened; and since then the Magic Three has never disappointed me.

Facilitation Level

Easy

Objectives

1. Provide a structured activity to guide people through an experience of reflection.
2. Practice authentic communication.
3. Create a connection with listeners.

Materials

- None

Time

Up to fifteen minutes per person

Directions

1. Give this as an overnight assignment during a multi-day workshop or retreat.
2. Tell participants to think of three personal stories that have some relationship among them.

3. Ask participants to share their stories with the group the next day.
4. Debrief the activity.

Debriefing

- *The good news:* this is *almost always* an easy activity to debrief given the richness of the experience for the teller and the group listening to him or her. The activity runs itself. Your main job is to give people ample time to react to the story. When a teller is finished, it is a good idea to allow some silence in the room. Start the debriefing process with the teller. Ask him, “How did that feel?” Alternatively, if he hasn’t done so already ask him to explain how he came up with the three stories. If it was an emotionally charged set of stories, feel free to ask a few follow-on questions about one or more of the stories. However, be prepared to redirect the group if one or more people become too engrossed in the details of a story or pursue tangential lines of questioning. Some of this sort of thing is okay but can quickly take a group off track.
- Next, if it hasn’t started happening naturally already, ask the group to provide feedback, impressions, and reactions to the teller. Some people may even feel compelled to spontaneously share a story of their own. Encourage the teller and then the group to reflect on the relationship between the stories and discuss insights that have emerged from them.
- Tie the outcomes of the activity to the major themes, lessons, and insights of the workshop.
- *How did the teller’s communication style change when he or she was telling a story? How were you impacted as a listener?* People who find it difficult to speak in front of a group will experience a real connection with their audience. Likewise, listeners will describe the teller as engaging, and the stories as rich or stimulating. This is the result of the teller reliving her experience.
- *What’s the connection between the stories? How and why did these three stories become associated with one another?* Before participating in this activity someone may have never associated these stories to one another. In some cases, this may be the first time he or she is suddenly recalling an experience from the past that was forgotten. One story leads to the trail of another. This is the reflective power of stories. Stories by their nature are multi-threaded. Frays of the thread can twist and unwind in lots of unexpected ways. As stories come apart, they can be rejoined to others to form new networks of meaning and significance.

Variations

- Vary the number of stories (however, it should be two at a minimum and under most circumstances not more than five).

- Have participants work on the assignment during the workshop.
- Tell stories during a working lunch.
- Change the type of stories you ask participants to think about and tell (e.g., from personal ones to work-related ones). Depending on the nature of the workshop and the composition of your group, you can be very specific in the parameters you set.
- Limit the number of participants in the activity.
- Spread out the number of people who share their stories across multiple days.
- Break participants into smaller groups and have people share their stories within the smaller groups. Ask each group to select one of its members' stories and have a member of the group other than the owner of the story retell it to the group at large.
- Invite one of the participants to facilitate the group debriefing.
- Ask everyone to anonymously write down three major things that struck them about the stories (do this before any group debriefing). Provide the feedback to the story owner.
- Add a visual component to the activity. Instruct participants to create a collage or some other kind of visual to document their stories.
- Encourage listeners to share any of their stories that have been triggered by another person's stories.

Tips

- Be purposefully vague in your instructions. This is one of those times when less is more. Some participants may struggle with the directions. Encourage them to grapple with the ambiguity. Out of the ambiguity comes the reflective soul-searching that is necessary. Be aware that detail-oriented people may become slightly frustrated by your lack of clear and precise directions. That's okay. Apologize to them and explain that it will make more sense to them after the activity. Realize that you may need to bear the brunt of their temporary aggravation. At this point there is no need to relieve it. It would only alleviate your feelings, but not help the participant. Afterward, point out that the success of the activity is contingent on participants' finding a path through their experiences. I'll sometimes joke and say, "In the words of Hamlet, 'I must be cruel to be kind.'"
- Emphasize that stories need to have some sort of thread or connection between them. Encourage participants to look for non-linear connections. That is to say, the stories they select that have a relationship to each other can be from very different times and parts of their lives.

- Do not provide your own example in advance. After one or more participants share their three stories, you may feel free to share yours. The purpose in doing so is to generate greater trust, intimacy, and authenticity with the group. Your stories as a facilitator of the group may also be a good tool for defusing any intense or difficult dynamics that arise in the group as a result of someone else's stories.
- Never judge the stories or anyone's response/reaction to them.
- Allow there to be some silence after a participant shares his or her three stories.
- Insist that people come to the front of the room to tell their stories. Unless someone is completely emotionally or physically incapable of being in front of the room, it is an essential part of the activity. People overcome their inhibitions about speaking when they tell stories.
- Confiscate notes from the participant sharing his or her stories. Despite whatever inclination he or she may have, he or she will not need notes, and using them will prevent the person from reliving his or her story.
- Limit the number of tellers if you are pressed for time. People listening learn from the activity sometimes as much if not more than tellers.

Applications

1. This is a great activity to use in any offsite retreat.
2. Incorporate this as a team-building activity or let members of a team take turns sharing their magic three at the start of regular meetings.
3. Use as an icebreaker or lunch activity during an event.

Case Study

I was facilitating a workshop on personal effectiveness in business. Len was a nonsense technology project manager for a nuclear research company. Len possessed exceptional communication skills. He was clear, precise, succinct, and very articulate. However, despite his technical prowess as a communicator, Len observed that he often failed to connect with people on an emotional level.

I gave Len two assignments. The first assignment was to take a complex newspaper article on a controversial topic and in thirty seconds or less provide a summary of the article's information and make a recommendation. Len's second assignment was the *Magic Three*.

Len performed the newspaper activity with the prowess of a polished politician. He was absolutely brilliant. I wanted him to serve as an example of how to deliver an effective executive sound bite. There are many times when we have thirty seconds or less to make an elevator pitch.

After appropriate accolades, I asked Len to share his three stories with us. In a matter of a few seconds, Len's body language began to transform in front of our very eyes. His erect, formal stature was replaced with a more relaxed posture. As he began to share his stories with the group, he moved to the edge of a table to sit down. Here is a recapitulation of his stories as I remember them:

I've always been a fairly private person so joining groups was never high on my list of things to do. About seven years ago I decided to get more involved with my local Catholic church group. I was surprised at how quickly I began forming a core group of friends who became a central part of my life. Weekends were filled with fishing trips, barbecues with our wives and families, and general fraternizing with my new cohorts. It had been a long time since I had experienced this kind of camaraderie and I was relishing every minute of it. As a group, we kept growing closer and closer. Even my family was caught off guard by the quality and depth of relationships I developed with a bunch of total strangers. This continued for several years. After a horrible car accident, I found myself in the hospital recovering from a life-threatening back surgery and long days of excruciating pain blunted by the constant dripping of numbing morphine. Everything was a haze. I was in a complete fog of pain, depression, and despair. During these horrific weeks, there were two pins of light that got me through these dark times, my family and my friends. Family you kind of expect to be there for you, but I was amazed at the dedication and energy my friends gave to me when I needed them the most. To this day I believe my friends were a special gift granted to me to ensure I pulled through a very trying experience. A couple of years later my buddies wanted to go on a weekend retreat with the church. I resisted, but after a lot of cajoling I agreed to go. We had a fantastic time, and the retreat was filled with lots of soulful opportunities to recharge our batteries and put the challenges of life into perspective. My friends made the retreat a special experience and I returned home with fresh vigor and zest. A day after my return, my father died unexpectedly. I believe my friends and the retreat were granted to me as a form of preparation for my father's death. I was able to be a source of comfort and strength for my family. I had more emotional energy to give to them. To this day, I am eternally grateful for friendship and all of the richness it has given me in life.

Unfortunately, my retelling is pale in comparison to Len's original account. It's missing all of the other subtle forms of communication that accompanied it, such as body language, eye contact, and tone of voice. When Len finished, there was silence in the room. People needed a moment to exit their imaginations and reenter

the workshop's frame of reference. Ken confessed he had never told these stories to anyone else before; and prior to the workshop he never would have dreamed of sharing them in a work environment. He reflected on the powerful connection of friendship he discovered in the three stories. Then Ken made an amazing leap of insight. He concluded that he needed to be selectively more vulnerable with people at work in order to improve his personal effectiveness. Ken committed to spending more time cultivating relationships in his organization. Stories, he discovered, are one of the best tools for building effective, meaningful relationships.

