



Jim's GEMS¹ #4: The Rule of 3

April's little GEM involves the number 3. If you research the number 3, you'll find it has a rich history. Christianity: The Holy Trinity, Buddhism: The Three Jewels, Hinduism: The Trimurti. In Psychology: Freud's Id, Ego, and Superego, or the Enneagram's three centers of intelligence: head, heart, and gut (body). Even the arc of human existence: birth – life – death. For our purposes, we'll discuss—you guessed it—three practical uses for the Rule of 3. (R3, hereafter)

1. **Candor.** All clients ask about communication: how do we improve it? Our answer involves the two aspects of communicating: giving and receiving messages. The former we call skillful candor and the latter a curious mindset. R3 is a great metric for determining if you are being candid. Say you are in a meeting and a thought relevant to the meeting (not what you plan to have for dinner) comes to mind three times. If you don't speak it to the group when it surfaces for the third time, we would say you're not being candid. Instead, you are "withholding." And a good question for you to ask yourself at that point might be: why am I unwilling to share this thought? Typical responses to this question are: 1) I might offend someone, 2) I might look stupid, 3) there's no upside to my saying it. But if your team really wants to practice candor, then R3 allows for you to do so with relatively little risk. You merely say, "Rule of 3, the thought keeps coming to me that we need to add Susan to this team because she is the best subject matter expert for this project." Almost every team meeting at FCG, someone invokes R3.

A case in point: Many investment professionals are introverted so their tendency is to remain quiet and NOT share their thoughts. One such CIO learned about the rule of three and realized that he was withholding continually in meetings. When he explored his behavior, he found there was no good reason why he wasn't sharing his thoughts. He just preferred to be silent and listen to others. Further exploration with his staff revealed that many of his withholds would be very valuable to his PMs and analysts. In fact, they had been looking for the information and guidance that the CIO had been withholding. Now the CIO uses the rule of three often in meetings as he recognizes that thoughts are recurring in his mind that he is not sharing. The simple practice is to say, "Rule of three", and then share the recurring thought. R3 is especially useful if your team wishes to think creatively and make excellent decisions...and what team doesn't!? In a brainstorming session, R3 clears the way for all ideas to get offered up, no matter how wacky they might seem. But importantly, team members need to honor the spirit behind R3: no judgment about ideas that get raised. If criticism is leveled at an idea invoked under R3, then the safety has been impaired and R3 won't be effective.

2. **Feedback.** Clearly, in the realm of feedback and self-improvement, R3 is crucial. When we collect 360 data for a person who has signed up for coaching, we use R3 all the time. For example, in the comment section, where colleagues are asked to comment on the person being reviewed, we use R3. We look for how many colleagues have provided a similar comment. One comment is an outlier. Two similar comments might be worth noting. But if three colleagues write about the same issue or behavior, then pay attention! The old joke goes: if one person calls you a horse's ass, forget it. If two people do, then get curious about it. If a third does, buy a saddle!

¹ Grand Epiphanies for Management Success



Another good feedback use for R3 is using three colleagues as your trusted feedback providers. We all have blindspots, so if we're serious about playing at the top of our game, we should be soliciting feedback continually from our three trusted providers. All my colleagues at FCG provide me with excellent feedback but three in particular know me better and see me more often: Liz, Keith, and Bryan. I look to these three trusted colleagues to provide feedback on questions like:

- Was I talking too much during a client call? Should I have listened more, said less?
- Did I jump into hero mode and try to fix their problem, or did I properly listen and coach them?
- And most important: Did you notice anything on the call that may be a blindspot, something I'm not aware of?

So, take a second right now and reflect: do I have three colleagues who provide me with good feedback. Please don't kid yourself into thinking that you are perfectly self-aware and have no blindspots. We all do.

3. **Serendipity.** Defined as *the faculty or [phenomenon](#) of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for*, serendipity occurs often in the use of R3. For example, if three different people recommend a book to you, do you pay attention? Do you make a mental note: I should read that book. My colleagues at FCG have wonderful examples of R3 directing them to a book, new client, key insight, and even a winning investment idea. My most recent R3 for serendipity came in the form of three emails from a certain industry group, which prompted me to wonder: would they like FCG to present at an upcoming conference? I could have simply hit "delete" three time when I saw these emails, but having lived with R3 for years and seen its benefits, I decided to contact the sender of the email and ask about FCG presenting. The upshot: FCG has been invited to speak at their next conference. So, pay attention to events that come in threes and see if the "Universe" is trying to tell you something. Often it is.

So, in keeping with the spirit of R3, I offer these three takeaways:

1. Use R3 as a measure of Candor. When a thought arises for the third time do you say it?
2. Use R3 to reveal blindspots by choosing three colleagues to provide candid feedback about your behavior with clients, colleagues, staff members and others.
3. Use R3 to identify serendipities, i.e. things that appear three times. The Universe may be tapping you on the shoulder... 😊

Happy hunting in the world of 3s!