

Get A Third Opinion

by Chris Warren

<http://www.americanwaymag.com/microsoft-advisors>

To diagnose and treat your company's problems, you can't stop with a second opinion. Throughout history, leaders at the top of business and government have relied on trusted outsiders to test their ideas and pick apart their assumptions. Clark Clifford, who counseled Democratic and Republican presidents for decades, coined the term for these indispensable yet often unknown advisors: the third opinion. These are the folks who tell the hard truths, who give executives their reality check. Dr. Saj-nicole Joni, a former MIT science professor and Microsoft executive, says the third opinion can be the kind of advice that helps people navigate their way up the corporate ladder. For top-level managers, however, it's paramount - because as they advance, executives become increasingly isolated and find themselves less and less able to get objective input inside their companies.

A third-opinion advisor to some of the top corporate executives in the world, Joni became so convinced of the power of outside perspective that she not only founded Cambridge International Group Ltd., a consulting firm that specializes in it, but she also took three years to interview hundreds of executives and their counselors to better understand how and why the third opinion is so vital. The result is her book, *The Third Opinion: How Successful Leaders Use Outside Insight to Create Superior Results* (Penguin Group, 2004). American Way recently spoke with Joni about when to seek a third opinion, how to find a good outside advisor, and why that advisor shouldn't give you, well, advice.

Why is the third opinion so important? Good leaders faced with tough issues get a lot of input from all kinds of people around them. They get people who hopefully have the expertise and the resources to help solve the problem, people who have insight into what's going on and who have a vested interest in the outcome. Those are called second opinions. If you're a CEO, you want your head of marketing, your head of sales, and your head of manufacturing to have incredibly passionate vested interests in the outcomes of decisions. Most of the work of leadership is getting the best team of second opinions around you and marshaling them to go somewhere together.

It turns out that for the executive - whether the top person or middle person or early leader - only being in dialogue with people who have a vested interest makes you isolated in certain kinds of thinking. It's very important to also have access to a trusted network of third-opinion advisors so that you do the full realm of thinking. The third opinion is where you seek the right expertise from people with an outside perspective and no vested interest in the outcome. That's the distinction. For many people I work with, it's not that I'm better than their people. But I help them analyze complex choices, and they know they don't have to figure out my spin or agenda.

So you can't completely trust your colleagues? When you're talking to second opinions, it's very hard to sort out what people are saying in their own self-interest and what they're saying that's really objective. I'm not talking about bad and devious people. We're all organizational people, and it's not wise in organizational life to always tell the unvarnished truth.

Also, in an organization, you build strong cultures of belief that bind people together and allow them to do extraordinary things. The only problem with that is that every strong culture has a way of looking at the world that leaves things out. I worked at Microsoft, and Microsoft looks at the world through a very Microsoft-centric lens. When you're there, that's very compelling, but it isn't the whole picture.

How do you find third-opinion advisors? One of the most important functions of networking is to meet interesting thinkers who can bring perspective and insight to your work. First, look for people who have the ability to see multiple sides of a complex issue. Second, look for someone who asks great questions and listens for what isn't said as much as to what is said. Obviously,

you absolutely have to have someone of the highest integrity. They have to have useful expertise and knowledge. And this sounds contradictory, but I look for people who don't offer advice.

But aren't you going to them for advice? It isn't about them saying, "Oh, I've listened to you, here's what I would do." It's about their ability to explore with you the complexities of a situation until it becomes clear to you what makes sense for you to do.

Now that you have your third-opinion people, how do you know which issues require their input? Very often, leaders I'm working with have to make a choice: Am I going to buy or sell a business; am I going to put more resources into building a certain part of my business and take them away from something else? They've looked at it themselves and they have a great team and they have tons of data. But the reality is that every single choice has positives and negatives. A great place for third-opinion work is to help people look at unintended consequences ... that will clearly make one choice better than another.

How many third opinions should people solicit? When you do it well, it's a network. A senior leader will generally have two or three people.

Some people find one person they're really great with, and they latch on - which is great, but it has some problems. For instance, if you're only talking to one person, over time that can become habitual.

What do you do if your colleagues are telling you one thing and your third opinion is telling you something completely opposite? The goal of the third opinion is to help you broaden your own thinking. The last thing you do is walk in and say, "Well, guys, you've all been telling me this, but I've been talking to Saj-nicole and she says this, and I'm going with her." That's a recipe for disaster. Great leaders know how to take their teams through a process similar to the one they've been through with their third-opinion advisors.

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### **case study**

#### **fire prevention or firefighting?**

matt, the top u.s. executive of a multinational financial corporation based overseas, read in the wall street journal about a company that had used a series of investments to fraudulently hide debt. one of the transactions described in the article was familiar: his company had done a similar deal, albeit in a way that was perfectly legal.

concerned that his company would be lumped in with those that had acted inappropriately, matt pondered the bad press - not to mention a fall in stock price and even the loss of his own job - that could result. unsure of what to do, he called on his third-opinion network.

first, he called an outside lawyer he'd known for years, one who had deep experience in financial transactions, and asked him to review what matt's company had done. the lawyer verified that the transaction was aboveboard.

next, matt called a public relations executive to air his idea of going to the press proactively to prove the company had done nothing wrong. the pr executive advised against it.

finally, matt called dr. saj-nicole joni to talk through the possible scenarios. together, they searched for analogous situations. they came up with one: firefighters who actually light fires to prevent bigger ones.

matt opted to prepare a detailed response, in case negative press coverage materialized. in other words, he got ready to fight fire with fire. fortunately for matt, there was never a reason to light it. four signs it's time to seek a third opinion

1. i'm capable of this, but i just don't have time to think about all of it with the right amount of focus.
2. if i don't get this right, we'll be in serious trouble.
3. even if i had the time, i shouldn't take on these issues alone.
4. i can handle this, but might i accelerate or enable significantly better results if i thought through my options with someone else?

**case study**  
**rock the boat**

the third opinion is also useful for people early in their careers. take eleanor, a project manager for a software company, responsible for a product that helped small businesses with regulatory record-keeping.

eleanor had a hunch that her software, sold as a stand-alone offering, might be in trouble. other large companies sold similar software in a bundle of products that did many other things, too. why, she thought, would anybody buy her solitary software when they could get a package that allowed them to accomplish much more?

eleanor thought something needed to be done, but she didn't think her colleagues would be eager to hear her ideas. they all had a vested interest in making sure the company sold the current software; they were judged inside the company on those sales. those sales were why they all had jobs.

eleanor sought opinions from a former boss who had left to join a research firm, from a peer in a different part of her own company, and from a longtime friend from business school. what these outside perspectives helped her understand was that she was right to be worried: her software didn't stand a chance. she had to do something before the numbers started tanking.

now confident in her own opinion, eleanor made the difficult case to her colleagues that the product should be rolled up with a suite of other software the company sold. then she made the case to her bosses. she and her team were put in charge of integrating the software into the larger package. the move probably saved all of their jobs — and soon after, eleanor got a promotion.