

GREG TRINIDAD

THE FIRE TRIANGLE

*Why people really
start moving*

STAKE
TRUST
URGENCY

PART I · FREE



PART I

THE FIRE TRIANGLE

WHY PEOPLE REALLY START MOVING

The Fire

Chapters 1 to 6

GREG TRINIDAD

firetrianglebook.com

The Fire Triangle — Why people really start moving
Part I · The Fire

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“Fire triangle” is a generally used technical term for the three conditions a fire requires. It is used here as the title of this book and is not claimed as a trade mark in English.

The full book runs to thirty chapters and can be found at vuurdriehoek.nl.

“You can’t force anybody to make a decision. You can only design an environment in which that decision becomes the logical one.”

— Greg Trinidad

DEDICATION

*For my wife,
who taught me that you don't have to promise anything.
And for my children,
who showed me every day
that listening is harder than explaining.*

HOW TO READ THIS

This book has a few recurring parts. They come back regularly, though not in every chapter.

The opening quote sits under the chapter title and points at where the chapter is going.

Fire Insight is the core in a box. Short. You're allowed to disagree with it; that's the intention.

Design Flaw and **Design Law** are numbered and run through the whole book. They're listed together at the back.

The closing question ends nearly every chapter. That question is the subject of the chapter after it.

• • •

In the first two parts you'll notice that chapters regularly end by telling you they were about something other than you thought. That's deliberate, because those parts are about discovering. From Part III onwards it stops, because there's nothing left to reveal. From there it's only applied.

• • •

There are diagrams here and there. They contain nothing new — just what's in the text, in a single glance.

• • •

At the back you'll find the diagnosis on one page, the Fire Path, all the design flaws and laws, and reflection questions.

Where to start

This book is written to be read front to back. Parts I and II build on each

other, and the later parts refer back to them.

• • •

But it's a thick book, and not everybody reads that way.

• • •

So if you'd rather start somewhere else, these are the routes.

• • •

Work in sales? Read 1, then 9 and 10, then 17.

After that 15, because that's about the moment most salespeople ruin.

• • •

Lead a team? Read 1, then 11 and 13, then 18.

After that 23, because projects founder on exactly the same thing.

• • •

Make policy? Read 2 and 8, then 19.

Chapter 8 matters most there, and it isn't about energy.

• • •

Advise for a living? Read 5 and 7, then 10 and 14.

Those are the four chapters about the order of diagnosis and solution.

• • •

Stuck with yourself? Read 13 and 25.

That's only two, and together they take half an hour.

• • •

Whatever your route, read chapters 3 and 4.

• • •

That's where the model is, and without those two the rest won't follow.

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PART I

THE FIRE

Why people don't move on their own.

Everyone was right. And still nothing happened.

“The biggest discoveries rarely begin with an answer. They begin with a question that won’t leave you alone.”

There are questions that stay with you.
Not because they’re complicated.
Precisely because they look so simple.

• • •

Why do some business owners buy and others don’t?

• • •

Why does one manager get a team moving without effort, while another keeps pushing and pulling and gets nowhere?

• • •

Why can some organisations reinvent themselves again and again, while others talk about it for years without a single thing changing?

• • •

Those questions kept me busy for a long time.

• • •

Not from a textbook.
From the road.

• • •

In the late nineties I worked as a financial adviser.

• • •

The job was simple.

I helped people arrange their financial future.

• • •

At least...

...that's what I thought.

At the kitchen table

Every day I drove to people's homes with a folder under my arm.

• • •

I was well prepared.

• • •

I knew the products.

I knew the numbers.

I knew the tax rules.

I had been taught how to handle objections.

I knew exactly which benefits to name.

• • •

I did everything by the book.

• • •

And still...

...most people bought nothing.

• • •

That struck me as odd.

• • •

Because I wasn't selling a luxury.

I was selling something almost everyone would need sooner or later.

• • •

A supplementary pension.

• • •

Who wants less money later?

• • •

So I opened my conversations the way I had been taught.

• • •

"Good afternoon. I'm here to help you get your pension properly arranged."

• • •

And almost every time I got the same answer.

• • •

"What do you mean? My pension is fine, isn't it?"

• • •

I explained that it could be better.

That there were tax advantages.

That an annuity would give them extra security.

That it was sensible to look ahead now.

• • •

And almost every time, the conversation ended the same way.

• • •

“We’ll think about it.”

• • •

Or, more honestly:

• • •

“We don’t really need this.”

• • •

I drove home with a head full of questions.

• • •

Why couldn’t they see what I could see?

• • •

Why would people refuse to solve a problem when the solution was sitting on the table in front of them?

What I said, and what they heard

It took me twenty years to understand what happened in those first thirty seconds.

• • •

Look at my opening line again.

• • •

“I’m here to help you get your pension properly arranged.”

• • •

That sounds helpful.

It isn't.

• • •

What I was actually saying was this.

• • •

You have a problem.

You haven't noticed it.

I have.

• • •

That isn't an offer.

That's a judgement with a smile on it.

• • •

And what does a person defend first?

• • •

Not their wallet.

Not their pension.

Their judgement.

• • •

I thought I was dealing with their finances.

I was dealing with their pride.

More matches

So I did what most salespeople do.

• • •

I decided to get better.

• • •

I took more training.

Learned new techniques.

New arguments.

New closing questions.

New ways of handling objections.

• • •

I got better and better...

...and the results barely moved.

• • •

Looking back, I was doing exactly what most people do when something doesn't work.

• • •

I kept reaching for another match.

• • •

And we do that everywhere.

• • •

A project stalls?

We schedule a meeting.

An employee hesitates?

We send an email.

A business owner won't invest?

We raise the subsidy.
A change effort fails?
We write a new policy document.

• • •

Over and over we add more matches.

• • •

And almost never do we ask whether the match was the problem in the first place.

• • •

Hold that image for a moment. In chapter 3 it turns out not to be a figure of speech.

• • •

Looking back, I know what I did wrong, and it had nothing to do with my explanation.

• • •

I walked in with the solution.
And when it wasn't accepted, I explained it better.

• • •

A step was missing.
Which step, I only understood years later — and I come back to it at length in Part II.

The day I stopped talking

The turning point didn't come during a course.
Not during a sales training.

And not because I got a better product.

• • •

It came from something much simpler.

• • •

I stopped talking.

And started looking.

• • •

I stopped looking at the policy.

Not at the pension statement.

Not at the tax advantages.

• • •

I looked at the people.

• • •

I saw photographs of children on the wall.

I saw two cars in the driveway.

I saw a caravan beside the house.

I saw a dog come bounding towards me.

I saw a family that was visibly happy.

• • •

And for the first time I didn't ask the question I always asked.

• • •

"So how is your pension set up?"

• • •

I asked something else entirely.

• • •

“What a beautiful place you have here. Have you lived here long?”

• • •

The room changed immediately.

• • •

There was laughter.

Stories came out.

• • •

About the children.

About holidays.

About the renovation.

About the neighbourhood.

About plans for the future.

• • •

For the first time I wasn't having a sales conversation.

I was having a conversation with people.

What I had actually collected

Look at what I had in those ten minutes.

• • •

A house they didn't want to leave.

Two cars.

Children who need driving to school.

A caravan that goes out every summer.

• • •

That isn't an inventory of what they own.

• • •

That's an inventory of what they have to lose.

• • •

I didn't know that at the time. I return to it in chapter 9, because there's an explanation behind it that reaches far beyond selling.

• • •

Only much later did we get out the pension papers.

• • •

We looked at their current income.
Then at the pension they could expect.

• • •

I explained nothing.
I just pointed at the numbers.

• • •

Then I asked one question.

• • •

"You like the way you live now, don't you?"

• • •

They nodded.
"Yes, of course."

• • •

I pointed at the numbers again.

• • •

“And honestly — do you think this income will be enough to keep living like this?”

• • •

It went quiet.

• • •

They weren’t looking at me any more.

They were looking at each other.

• • •

I will never forget that moment.

• • •

Because right there, something happened.

Not in my head.

In theirs.

• • •

I had nothing left to sell.

I had nobody left to convince.

• • •

I only had to ask one more question.

• • •

“Would you like me to help you close that gap?”

• • •

Everything changed from that point on.
Not just my sales figures.
My way of looking.

TWO CONVERSATIONS, ONE PRODUCT

Same man. Same folder. Same afternoon.

THE FIRST CONVERSATION

*"I'm here to help you get
your pension properly arranged."*

I explained.
I made my case.
I handled objections.

I was doing the talking.

*"We'll think
about it."*

THE SECOND CONVERSATION

*"What a beautiful place
you have here."*

I asked.
I looked.
I listened.

They were doing the talking.

*"Would you like me to help
you close that gap?"*

The product didn't change. The price didn't change. Only who was doing the talking.

• • •

Twenty years later I finally understand what happened that afternoon.

• • •

I wasn't selling a pension.
I wasn't selling an annuity.
I wasn't even selling financial security.

• • •

What I was doing...
...without knowing it...

...was something else entirely.

• • •

I was lighting a fire.

The evening after

That night I sat at my own kitchen table.

• • •

I often did, after a working day.

Not because I enjoyed the paperwork.

But because I wanted to understand why one conversation flowed and another went nowhere.

• • •

My diary was open.

• • •

I could see the names of the clients who had said yes.

And beside them, the ones who wanted to think about it.

• • •

I started reconstructing what had actually happened.

• • •

Not what *I* had said.

What *they* had said.

• • •

That turned out to matter.

• • •

In the conversations that failed, I had been talking almost the whole time.

• • •

I told.

I explained.

I supported my case.

I persuaded.

I defended my advice.

• • •

In the conversations that worked, the opposite happened.

• • •

There, the client talked.

• • •

About his children.

His plans.

His business.

His house.

His future.

• • •

And then something struck me.

• • •

In the successful conversations I had barely mentioned my product at all.

• • •

In fact...

• • •

The less I talked about what I was selling, the more likely people were to buy it.

• • •

That couldn't be right.

• • •

Every sales training I had ever taken taught the exact opposite.

• • •

There I learned to name benefits.

To handle objections.

To use closing techniques.

• • •

But nobody had ever taught me to be curious.

Everyone was right

And here is something that only struck me much later.

• • •

At that kitchen table, everyone was right.

• • •

The client was right: his pension was properly arranged.

I was right: it could be better, and my numbers were correct.

My training was right: name the benefits and handle the objections.

Even my employer was right: it was a good product.

• • •

Everyone was right. And nothing happened.

• • •

That is the kind of problem this book is about.

• • •

Not the problem where somebody makes a mistake.

• • •

But the problem where everyone does exactly what they're supposed to do, and still nothing comes of it.

FIRE INSIGHT

People don't move because you are convinced.

They move when their own interest becomes clear enough to them.

THE CLOSING QUESTION

You probably think this chapter was about selling pensions.

It wasn't.

It was about the moment two people stopped looking at me and started looking at each other.

What exactly happened in that moment — and why did I have no idea at the time?

"I spent twenty years thinking I had to get better at convincing people. I should have been getting better at looking."

— Greg Trinidad

Actually...

“Sometimes one word tells you everything you need to know.”

I had heard the word hundreds of times.
Probably thousands.

...

But I had never really paid attention to it.

...

Until years later, when I was working with my team on something completely different. Sustainability.

...

We founded **Verduurzamen Doen We Samen** with one simple mission.

...

Help business owners take the first step towards making their premises more energy-efficient.

...

At first that looked easy.

...

The technology was there.
The installers were there.

The subsidies were there.
The advisers were standing by.

• • •

Everything a business owner could possibly need was available.

• • •

And still...
...it stayed remarkably quiet. Nobody wanted to take the first step.

The four sentences

This is what I heard.

• • •

“I already have LED lighting and solar panels, I wouldn’t know what else to do.”

• • •

“I’m busy running my business, I don’t have time for this.”

• • •

“It all costs a lot of money, and I don’t have it.”

• • •

“I’ll see about it when it becomes compulsory.”

• • •

And those are just a few examples.

• • •

I found that strange.

• • •

The Dutch are known as a nation of doers.

• • •

They invest every day.

• • •

In machines.

In people.

In software.

In buildings.

In marketing.

• • •

So why not in this?

We decided to listen

We decided not to start by selling.

We decided to listen.

• • •

We went out and talked.

• • •

With business owners from every sector.

• • •

Construction.

Transport.

Manufacturing.

Hospitality.
Retail.
Family firms.
Multinationals.

• • •

Not to convince anyone of anything.
Just to understand.

• • •

And almost every conversation started the same way.

• • •

“Yes... we should actually be doing something about this.”

Actually

That one word stayed with me.

• • •

Because what does it actually mean?

• • •

It means:

• • •

“I know it’s sensible.”

“I know it’s coming.”

“I know I’ll have to do something about it eventually.”

• • •

But not today.

Not tomorrow either.

Maybe next year.

• • •

And so nothing happened.

• • •

And that is exactly why more information doesn't help.

• • •

Somebody who doesn't understand asks:

"Why would I?"

• • •

Somebody who doesn't believe you says:

"Nonsense."

• • •

But somebody who says *actually* already agrees with you.

• • •

He has heard your argument, weighed it, and accepted it.

• • •

And he still isn't moving.

• • •

Anyone who responds to that with more explanation is winning an argument that was won long ago.

Four answers, three causes

Look again at the four answers I heard.

• • •

They look alike.

They aren't.

• • •

One is about time.

One is about money.

One is about an obligation that doesn't exist yet.

• • •

Three different causes.

One response.

• • •

And I was treating all three the same way.

• • •

That was worth noticing.

• • •

Conditions had never been better.

• • •

There were subsidies.

There were suppliers.

There were advisers.

There were technical solutions.

There was political attention.

There was knowledge.

• • •

And still...

...nobody moved.

The reasoning behind the policy

The thinking in The Hague went like this.

• • •

“If we lower the cost of an energy audit with a subsidy, business owners will start on their own.”

• • •

They didn't. Not a chance, is roughly what the business owners thought.

• • •

And honestly, I don't find that policy thinking strange at all.

• • •

In fact.

FOUR ANSWERS, THREE CAUSES

WHAT HE SAYS	WHAT IT MEANS
"I already have LED and solar panels."	→ he doesn't know what else there is
"I'm busy running my business."	→ it isn't high enough on the list
"It costs a lot and I don't have it."	→ doubt about who to believe
"I'll see when it becomes compulsory."	→ no reason to start today

Not one of them says: I'm against this.

And I treated all four the same way.

• • •

Look carefully at that right-hand column.

• • •

No time almost never means no time.
Everybody finds time for what matters enough.
Somebody who says he has no time for it is really saying it isn't high enough on his list.

• • •

I don't have the money is more interesting still.

• • •

That same business owner does invest in a machine, in staff, in software.
The money is usually there.

• • •

What's missing is the certainty that this money will end up in the right place — and that is a question about who you believe.

• • •

If I had been a policymaker back then, I would probably have thought exactly the same thing.

• • •

Because money is a barrier.
So take the barrier away...
...and the rest will follow.

• • •

Right?

What actually happened

In practice something very different happened.

• • •

Many business owners never applied for the subsidy at all.

• • •

And the ones who did often got no further than the first report.

• • •

After that it stalled.

• • •

Not because the advice was bad.
Not because the technology was missing.

Not because there were no benefits.

• • •

Simply nothing...
...happened.

• • •

The longer I thought about it, the stranger it got.

And then the other thing

What struck me even more was what happened next.

• • •

When people don't move, a space opens up.

• • •

Space for quick solutions.
For attractive promises.
For companies that say:

• • •

"This subsidy is about to expire."

"Everyone's already doing it."

"It pays for itself."

• • •

Sometimes that was true.
Sometimes it wasn't.

• • •

I have spoken to business owners who signed for installations that didn't

suit their building.

• • •

Who paid for advice that was never carried out.

• • •

Who applied for a subsidy for something that was no use to them.

• • •

And here is the bitter conclusion.

• • •

They weren't dealing with a con artist who got around the system.

• • •

They were dealing with somebody who used the system exactly as it was designed.

• • •

Because if you make a subsidy available and leave the business owner to arrange everything else himself, then you reward whoever gets a signature fastest.

• • •

Not whoever gives the best advice.

• • •

Most people who sell that way don't have bad intentions.

• • •

But a system that doesn't match the way people actually decide will create room for the wrong incentives almost by itself.

FIRE INSIGHT

**When people aren't ready to decide, a space opens up for pressure.
And pressure can look like movement.
It rarely is.**

The same word everywhere

Conversation after conversation, I heard the same word.

• • •

Actually.

• • •

Not only about energy.

• • •

Also about digitisation.

About innovation.

About investment.

About hiring.

• • •

Even from business owners who were doing very well.

• • •

Everybody knew what was sensible.

• • •

And still... hardly anyone did anything.

• • •

More and more I found myself thinking back to my first years as a

financial adviser.

• • •

Twenty years earlier I had seen exactly the same thing.

• • •

A different sector.

A different product.

The same human response.

• • •

And I started asking myself the same question again.

• • •

Not:

“What information is missing?”

• • •

Not:

“Which subsidy do I need to explain better?”

• • •

Not:

“How do I convince this business owner?”

• • •

But one much simpler question.

• • •

What’s missing here?

The question in the car

One day I was driving home from an appointment.

• • •

It had been one of those conversations.

• • •

A business owner who understood everything.
Everything.

• • •

He could see the advantages.
He knew the numbers.
He knew he would have to do this sooner or later.
He found my case perfectly logical.

• • •

And still he did nothing.

• • •

That evening I sat at home.
I poured a cup of coffee.

• • •

And while I was staring out of the window, my mind wandered.

• • •

Not to a business owner.
Not to a subsidy.
Not to a sales training.

• • •

But to something else entirely.

• • •

To a lesson I had been taught years earlier.

• • •

A lesson about...

...fire.

THE CLOSING QUESTION

If it wasn't the sector, and it wasn't the product, and it wasn't the people...

then what was it?

And there I sat, with a cup of coffee, thinking about something I'd learned at school.

What on earth does a lesson about fire have to do with a business owner who won't decide?

Everybody knows how to make a fire

“Some answers aren’t hidden. They’re so obvious we look straight past them for thirty years.”

So there I sat.

With a cup of coffee going cold.

And a thought that seemed to be about nothing at all.

• • •

Some insights don’t arrive in a meeting.

Not during a training course.

And not in one remarkable conversation either.

• • •

They arrive when you have looked at the same pattern for years, until you can’t ignore it any more.

• • •

That’s how it went for me.

• • •

By then I had spoken to hundreds of business owners.

• • •

I had heard the same questions. The same doubts. The same objections. And the same question kept coming back.

• • •

What's missing here?

• • •

One day I wasn't thinking about business owners.

Not about subsidies.

Not about selling.

• • •

My mind went to something everybody learns at school.

Play along for a minute

I want to ask you to do something.

• • •

It won't take long.

Less than a minute.

• • •

Picture a campfire.

• • •

It's evening.

The wood is stacked.

The air is still.

• • •

You strike a match and hold it against the wood.

The match burns down.

The wood doesn't catch.

• • •

You try again.
Another match.
And another.
And ten more.

• • •

Still nothing.

• • •

What do you do?

• • •

Everybody has built a campfire at some point.
Or lit a fireplace. Or a barbecue.

• • •

You lay the wood.
You try to light it.
Sometimes it takes straight away.
Sometimes not at all.

• • •

And then something remarkable happens.

• • •

Nobody says:
“Go and get twenty more matches.”

• • •

No.

• • •

You crouch down.
You look underneath.

• • •

Is the wood wet?
Is there enough air?
Is there enough heat?

• • •

You don't go looking for more fire.
You go looking for the missing condition.

• • •

Everybody does this.

• • •

Children do it.
People who have never read a book about decision-making do it.

• • •

You don't need training for it.
In fact, you probably never consciously learned it at all.

• • •

You just know.

It isn't a model

A fire only starts when three elements are present at the same time.

• • •

Fuel.

Oxygen.

Heat.

• • •

Take one away and there is no fire.

• • •

You can keep trying. You can blow harder. You can add more wood.

You can use ten matches. Or a hundred.

• • •

It makes no difference.

• • •

As long as one element is missing, it stays cold.

• • •

That isn't a model.

That's physics.

• • •

It's in every school textbook. Every firefighter learns it in their first week. And anybody who has ever lit a barbecue knows it from experience.

• • •

And right at that moment, it landed.

• • •

Maybe human behaviour works the same way.

• • •

Maybe we have spent decades trying to get people moving while one of the conditions simply wasn't there.

• • •

Maybe all our sales training...
...our change programmes...
...our leadership courses...
...our policy schemes...

• • •

...are nothing more than more matches.

• • •

And here is what makes it unusual.

• • •

This isn't a model.
This isn't a theory.
This is physics.

• • •

A firefighter doesn't need an opinion about it.
Neither does an arsonist.

• • •

Those two agree on almost nothing, but they agree on this.

• • •

It isn't a belief.

It's a law of nature.

• • •

I sat there with that realisation and didn't know whether to be pleased or embarrassed.

• • •

Twenty years of experience.

Hundreds of conversations.

Courses, training, books about persuasion.

• • •

And the answer turned out to be something I learned at school and never needed again.

Why we're smarter at a barbecue than at work

Think about that barbecue once more.

• • •

The wood won't catch.

• • •

What does nobody say?

• • •

"This wood just doesn't want to."

"This wood isn't motivated."

"I don't think this wood is ready yet."

• • •

Nobody says that.

It would sound ridiculous.

• • •

And there I was.

• • •

A man who gets down on his knees at a barbecue to work out what's missing.

• • •

And who, two hours earlier, had started talking louder at a kitchen table.

• • •

Same man.

SAME PROBLEM, TWO RESPONSES

It won't catch. What do you do?

AT A CAMPFIRE

You crouch down.

You look underneath.

Is the wood wet?

Is there enough air?

Is there enough heat?

WITH A PERSON

You talk louder.

You repeat your argument.

"He isn't motivated."

"He doesn't want to change."

"He doesn't get it."

Same man. Same day.

With wood we look for the missing condition. With people we look for an explanation.

Same day.

FIRE INSIGHT

With a fire we all know to look at what's missing. With people, almost nobody does.

There we say: "He isn't motivated." "He doesn't want to change." "He doesn't get it."

That is exactly the same as shouting that the wood doesn't want to burn.

When it's simply wet.

An uncomfortable thought

That was an uncomfortable thought.

• • •

Because if it's true, it means something else as well.

• • •

Then the problem isn't in the people.

Then it's in the design.

• • •

We try to make fire without first checking whether the conditions are there.

• • •

Uncomfortable, because we're used to something else.

• • •

We look for a name.

• • •

Who did this?

Who let this happen?

Who should have known better?

• • •

And as soon as we have that name, we're finished. The mistake has a face. Something has been said about it, something may have changed, and we move on.

• • •

Except nothing has been solved.

FIRE INSIGHT

More often than we think, the problem isn't the person who made the mistake. It's the system that invited it.

That isn't a free pass. Whoever makes a mistake stays responsible for it.

But with a name you repair one case.

With a design you repair all the ones after it.

• • •

That is the difference between finding somebody to blame and solving a problem.

• • •

The first one feels finished.

The second one is.

And then I saw it everywhere

From that moment on I started looking again, at everything.

• • •

Not at behaviour any more.

But at the conditions the behaviour grew in.

• • •

And suddenly I saw the same thing everywhere.

• • •

With clients. With managers. With government.

With my own children. In relationships. In negotiations. In organisations.

• • •

Even in myself.

• • •

Everywhere movement happened, the same conditions were present.

• • •

And everywhere people stood still, at least one of them was missing.

• • •

I didn't yet know exactly which.

• • •

But I knew something else.

• • •

I had stopped looking for better arguments.

I had started looking for the missing condition.

• • •

And that isn't the same question asked more sharply.

It's the opposite question.

• • •

One is about you, and what you still have to do.

The other is about him, and what his situation is lacking.

THE CLOSING QUESTION

You probably think this chapter was about a campfire. It wasn't.

It was about the question underneath it.

If we instinctively look for what's missing at a campfire...

...why do we never do that with a person?

“A fire never goes out because the match wasn't good enough. A fire goes out because one of the conditions for fire was missing. With people it is no different.”

— Greg Trinidad

The day I stopped selling

“Sometimes you don’t find the answer by searching harder. Sometimes it arrives from a direction you never expected.”

The next morning it was still there.
That hunch.

• • •

Usually something like that disappears overnight.

• • •

In the evening you think you’ve worked out something brilliant, and the next day it turns out to be hollow.

• • •

Not this.

• • •

Fuel, oxygen and heat kept going round in my head.

• • •

Not as physics.
But as something that was also about people.

• • •

I remember saying out loud:

• • •

“Hang on a minute...”

• • •

That wasn't a conclusion.

That was still wonder.

• • •

Because suddenly I could see that business owner again.

The one from the day before, from the car.

• • •

He had everything.

• • •

The numbers.

The subsidy.

The technology.

The advice.

• • •

And still nothing happened.

• • •

Not because he was against it.

But because...

...something was missing.

The notepad

I picked up a notepad.

At the top I wrote one word.

• • •

FIRE

• • •

Underneath I drew three lines.

• • •

That was all.

• • •

I didn't yet know what would go on them.

• • •

Only that it felt important.

The first line

I looked at the first line.

• • •

Fuel.

• • •

What is the fuel of a decision?

• • •

Not money.

• • •

Money matters sometimes.

But nowhere near always.

• • •

The business owner from that afternoon had money.

So did the one twenty years earlier.

• • •

No...

• • •

Fuel was something else.

• • •

It was the reason somebody would want to move in the first place.

• • •

His stake.

His dream.

His problem.

His ambition.

His family.

His business.

His future.

• • •

And suddenly I wrote down one word.

• • •

STAKE

• • •

I looked at it for a while.

• • •

That felt right.

The second line

Oxygen.

• • •

Why won't a fire burn without oxygen?

• • •

Because it has no room.

It suffocates.

• • •

I thought back to all those conversations where people said:

• • •

"I don't know."

"I'm still not sure."

"Let's leave it for now."

• • •

That was never about the solution.

• • •

That was about trust.

• • •

Trust in me.

Trust in the supplier.

Trust in the government.

Trust in themselves.

• • •

Again I wrote down one word.

• • •

TRUST

The third line

Heat.

• • •

Why does a campfire sometimes refuse to start for hours?

• • •

Because the temperature is too low.

Nothing happens at all.

• • •

I thought about all the business owners who had said to me:

• • •

“Next year.”

“After the holidays.”

“When things quieten down.”

“Let’s wait and see first.”

• • •

They weren’t against it.

They were convinced, even.

• • •

They simply had no reason at all to start today.

• • •

That was it.

• • •

Not motivation.

Urgency.

• • •

I wrote down the last word.

• • •

URGENCY

Three words

I leaned back.

• • •

Three words.

• • •

Stake.

Trust.

Urgency.

• • •

I looked at them.

• • •

And suddenly it felt as if I hadn't invented something new.

• • •

As if I had found something back.

• • •

As if it had always been there.

As if I had been working to this pattern for twenty years...

• • •

...without ever having given it a name.

The first test

I wanted to know whether it held.

• • •

So I did what you do with an idea that looks too neat: I held it against my own work.

• • •

Selling first.

• • •

I'd been in it for thirty years and I thought I knew why deals fail.

• • •

But look at those three words.

• • •

No stake.

The client has no problem that needs solving.

Then there's nothing to fan.

• • •

No trust.

The need is real, but he doesn't believe you're the right one.
Then he'll buy — just not from you.

• • •

No urgency.

He sees the stake, he trusts you, and he'll do it next quarter.

• • •

And that last one is the most treacherous.

• • •

Most deals don't founder on a no.

• • •

They founder on “later”.

• • •

For years I thought “later” was a polite no.

• • •

It isn't.

It's a yes with the heat missing.

The second test

Then sustainability.

• • •

I had heard it hundreds of times there, I just could never place it.

• • •

“Yes, this is important...”

• • •

And then a short pause, in which the business owner thinks something he doesn't say.

• • •

“...just not for me. Not now.”

• • •

That isn't an objection.

That's a diagnosis, if you're willing to hear it.

• • •

Because look at what happens there.

• • •

He confirms the stake in general.

And denies it for himself.

• • •

So there is no fuel yet.

• • •

And once I saw that, I started hearing the other two as well.

• • •

“It's bound to be expensive.”

“Subsidies are far too complicated.”

“I wouldn't know where to start.”

“I’m afraid of making the wrong investment.”

• • •

That isn’t about energy.
That’s about oxygen.

• • •

And then the third.

• • •

“We’ll take a look at it next year.”

• • •

No heat.

What that meant

WAT ONTBREEKT	IN EEN VERKOOPGESPREK	BIJ VERDUURZAMING
Belang	<i>“Ik heb geen probleem.”</i>	<i>“Belangrijk, maar niet voor mij.”</i>
Vertrouwen	<i>“Ik weet niet of dit de juiste partij is.”</i>	<i>“Ik weet niet waar ik moet beginnen.”</i>
Urgentie	<i>“Ik denk er nog even over na.”</i>	<i>“Volgend jaar kijken we ernaar.”</i>

Geen belang, geen gesprek.
Geen vertrouwen, geen samenwerking.
Geen urgentie, uitstel.
Twee werelden. Hetzelfde patroon.

• • •

Two worlds with nothing in common.

• • •

Pensions at a kitchen table. Solar panels on a factory roof.

• • •

The same pattern.

• • •

No stake, no conversation.

No trust, no partnership.

No urgency, delay.

• • •

And at that moment I understood something about my own trade that I had never dared to think.

• • •

I wasn't selling a pension.

I wasn't selling a subsidy.

I wasn't selling advice.

• • •

I was selling a decision.

• • •

And a decision doesn't arrive because you explained it better.

A decision arrives when the conditions are there.

• • •

I’ve come to think about the subsidy differently since then, too.

• • •

It isn’t part of the fire.

• • •

A campfire burns without firelighters.
With firelighters it just burns sooner.

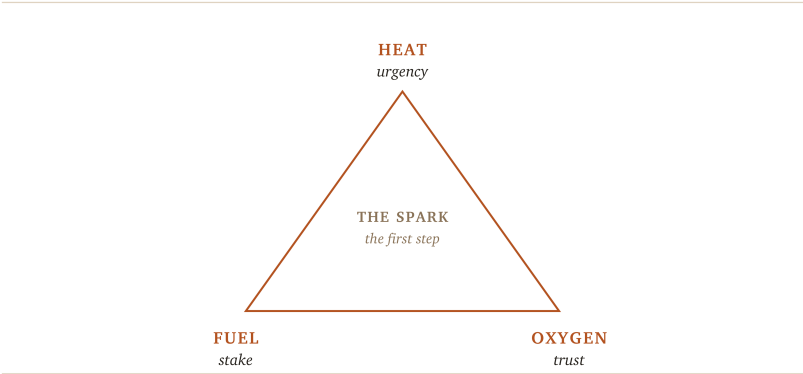
• • •

That’s how a subsidy works.
And that is exactly why it is never enough on its own.

And then it spread

Something odd happened at that point.

THE FIRE TRIANGLE



Three conditions, present at the same time.
Take one away and there is no fire.

• • •

I stopped thinking about sustainability.

• • •

I thought about my first years as a financial adviser.

About the families at the kitchen table.

About the directors I spoke to later.

About negotiations.

About projects that stalled.

About colleagues.

About managers.

About my own mistakes.

• • •

And every time I saw the same pattern.

• • •

It made no difference whether it was a pension.

Or a solar project.

Or a reorganisation.

Or a marriage.

Or a child you're trying to motivate.

• • •

Over and over, the same thing.

• • •

Not three separate factors.

One system.

• • •

I felt the hair go up on my arms.

• • •

Not because I thought I had come up with something remarkable.

• • •

But because for the first time I realised I might have been looking at the same thing for thirty years...

• • •

...without seeing it.

WHAT’S MISSING, AND WHAT YOU HEAR

NO STAKE	NO TRUST	NO URGENCY
<i>“It doesn’t really apply to me.”</i>	<i>“I wouldn’t know where to start.”</i>	<i>“We’ll look at it next year.”</i>
no conversation	no partnership	delay

Three different sentences. Three different causes.

And we treat them all the same way.

The line underneath

That evening I wrote one more sentence under the three words.

• • •

Not because I knew it would become a book.
Not because I was thinking about training courses.
Not because I was thinking about a management model.

• • •

But because I was afraid I'd forget it again.

• • •

I wrote:

• • •

**“People don’t move because they’ve been convinced.
People move when the fire is there.”**

• • •

I put down my pen.

• • •

And without knowing it...

• • •

...the first page of The Fire Triangle had been written.

• • •

The next morning I drove to an appointment.

• • •

Same car. Same folder. Same suit.

• • •

Only I wasn't going to sell any more.
I was going to look at what was missing.

• • •

That is the day I stopped selling.

• • •

Not because I'd got bad at it.

• • •

But because I finally understood it had never been my job.

THE CLOSING QUESTION

You probably think this chapter was about fire.

It wasn't.

It was about people.

And about the question that stayed behind: if a fire only starts when all three conditions are present...

...then why do we always start with the solution?

"People don't move because they've been convinced. People move when the fire is there."

— Greg Trinidad

The biggest mistaken assumption

“Most problems aren’t caused by bad people. They’re caused by good people starting from a false assumption.”

Once I had written down those three words, I started looking differently.

• • •

Not just at business owners.
At everything.

• • •

And that was perhaps the most confronting part.

• • •

Because the more examples I saw, the harder it became to dismiss them as coincidence.

What I thought myself

I had to start somewhere, and that was with me.

• • •

Years ago I thought people made bad decisions.

• • •

I really did.

• • •

When somebody wasn't building a supplementary pension, I thought that was unwise.

When a business owner didn't want to invest in his building, I thought he couldn't see the opportunity.

When an employee pushed back, I thought he was afraid of the new.

• • •

In my head the arithmetic was simple.

• • •

Good solution plus logical arguments equals good decision.

• • •

And if that didn't happen, something must be wrong with the other person.

• • •

Not consciously.

I would never have put it that way.

• • •

But that is exactly what I thought.

• • •

And almost everybody thinks it.

• • •

A manager says:

"My people don't want to change."

• • •

A salesperson says:

“The client doesn’t see the value.”

• • •

A policymaker says:

“Businesses aren’t taking up the scheme.”

• • •

A parent says:

“My child never listens.”

• • •

Four different worlds.

One move.

• • •

Everybody points at the behaviour.

• • •

I saw managers motivating staff with bonuses.

While nobody asked whether the work itself still meant anything.

• • •

I saw salespeople keep convincing a client.

While that client had decided long ago that he didn’t trust the salesperson.

• • •

I saw governments make millions available in subsidy.

And then be surprised that nobody moved.

• • •

Everybody was doing their absolute best.

• • •

And still nothing happened.

• • •

Why?

• • •

Because almost everybody starts from the same assumption.

• • •

If I make the solution better, the decision will follow.

• • •

That is the biggest mistaken assumption I have come across in my working life.

• • •

And I made it myself for years.

Why we keep doing it

I've stopped being harsh about it, because I now understand where it comes from.

• • •

You can improve a solution on your own.

• • •

At your desk.

This evening.

• • •

Understanding why somebody would move can only be done *with* that somebody.

• • •

And he isn't picking up the phone.

• • •

So we do the only thing within reach.

We improve what we can improve alone.

• • •

And as a profession, we have become extraordinarily good at it.

• • •

Our proposals are more beautiful than ever.

Our presentations have transitions.

Our policy papers have a summary, and a summary of the summary.

• • •

There are people who spend an entire working week improving something nobody has established anyone wants.

• • •

I was one of them.

• • •

I once rewrote a proposal three times for somebody who had stopped replying two months earlier.

• • •

The third version was really very good.

• • •

Because that isn't how people work.

• • •

A business owner doesn't invest because a subsidy exists.

A client doesn't buy because a product is good.

An employee doesn't change because the director gave an inspiring speech.

• • •

Those are all solutions.

• • •

Not reasons.

People aren't irrational

And here I have to correct something about myself.

• • •

For years I thought that people who didn't decide weren't thinking logically.

• • •

It's exactly the other way round.

• • •

Their choices were often surprisingly logical.

• • •

Just not from my reality.

From theirs.

• • •

Take a business owner who says:

• • •

“I’ll wait a bit.”

• • •

As an adviser you hear:

“He doesn’t want to invest.”

• • •

But what if he’s thinking:

• • •

“I don’t trust that supplier yet.”

• • •

Or:

“I don’t know which choice is the right one.”

• • •

Or:

“I have bigger worries right now.”

• • •

His behaviour is identical in all three cases.

• • •

Four words, pleasantly spoken.

• • •

But the cause is different every time.

• • •

And if you can't see the cause...

• • •

...you automatically pick the wrong solution.

“IK WACHT NOG EVEN”

Eén zin. Drie verschillende oorzaken.

“Ik vertrouw die leverancier nog niet.”

→ ontbrekend vertrouwen

“Ik weet niet welke keuze de juiste is.”

→ ontbrekend overzicht

“Ik heb op dit moment grotere zorgen.”

→ ontbrekend belang

Zelfde gedrag. Andere oorzaak. En dus een andere oplossing.

• • •

I once heard a salesperson say:

• • •

“I’ve sent three proposals and the client isn’t responding to anything.”

• • •

I asked:

“Why did he want to buy in the first place?”

• • •

He looked at me, surprised.

• • •

“Actually, I don’t know.”

• • •

And there was the whole problem.

• • •

He had made three perfect solutions for a question he had never investigated.

• • •

That is like having a key cut before anybody has decided which door they want to open.

• • •

And the strange thing is: that key can be perfect.

• • •

Beautifully finished.

Made to measure.

• • •

Just not for this door.

And still we start with the solution

I was no exception.

• • •

I walked in with the answer already in my bag, and only then started listening.

• • •

If I listened.

• • •

That there is something badly wrong with that order, I only discovered much later.

• • •

Chapter 7 is about that, and it starts with a surgeon.

The business owner who said nothing

I remember a business owner who said almost nothing during a meeting.

• • •

For an hour.

• • •

I talked, he nodded occasionally.

• • •

In the old days I would have thought:

“He isn’t interested.”

• • •

After an hour he stood up, shook my hand and said:

• • •

“I’ve hardly said a word today, have I?”

• • •

I nodded.

• • •

He smiled.

• • •

“That’s right. I always listen first. If I talk a lot, I don’t learn anything.”

• • •

I didn’t say much in the car on the way home. Not even to myself.

• • •

Since then I’ve been careful with quick conclusions.

• • •

People surprise you often.

Especially when you stop filling in the blanks.

• • •

I haven’t become softer, by the way.

• • •

Quite the opposite.

I became more critical.

• • •

Just not about people.

About assumptions.

THE CLOSING QUESTION

You probably think this chapter was about assumptions.

It wasn't.

It was about what we do the moment it turns out the assumption was wrong.

Because at that point the same thing happens in almost every organisation.

And that is what the next chapter is about.

“Anybody who blames the behaviour has never looked at the design.”

— Greg Trinidad

The fourth match

“When something doesn’t work, most people add something. Almost nobody looks at what’s missing.”

Go back to that campfire for a moment.

• • •

The first match that doesn’t take is nothing special.

Nor is the second.

By the third you start looking.

• • •

And then there’s the fourth.

• • •

That fourth one is different from the first three.

• • •

Because at that point you’re no longer making a fire.

• • •

You’re proving that you can make a fire.

• • •

The first three matches are about the wood.

The fourth is about you.

• • •

And that is exactly where it goes wrong, because from that moment you stop looking.

• • •

You push.

• • •

I did that for years without noticing.

• • •

When a client wouldn't take out a pension, I thought my explanation wasn't good enough.
So I explained harder.

• • •

When a business owner wouldn't invest, I thought I had to explain the subsidy better.
So I made prettier calculations.

• • •

When somebody hesitated, I gave more information.
More arguments.
More figures.
More examples.

• • •

More...
...matches.

And I wasn't alone

A change effort won't get off the ground?

• • •

We write a better plan.

We schedule another meeting.

We produce a detailed report.

We collect more data.

We send reminders.

We increase the budget.

We apply more pressure.

• • •

Another training course.

Another campaign.

Another scheme.

• • •

And still...

...often nothing changes.

• • •

There isn't an organisation where this doesn't happen.

• • •

And the striking thing is that nobody finds it odd.

• • •

Because it feels like progress.

• • •

You're doing something.

You're taking action.

You're working harder.

• • •

That's better than sitting still.

• • •

Isn't it?

• • •

I think it usually solves nothing.

• • •

Because a business owner who sees no stake gets irritated by yet more arguments.

• • •

An employee who has no trust isn't convinced by yet another presentation.

• • •

A client with no urgency doesn't buy because you sent yet another proposal.

• • •

On the contrary.

• • •

You increase the distance.

• • •

Not because your story is bad.

• • •

But because you're trying to solve a problem that isn't the real problem yet.

What it costs

And there's something I only understood much later.

• • •

Every next match makes the one after it less likely to work.

• • •

Because something changes in how the other person sees you.

• • •

At the first meeting you're somebody who came to help.

By the third you're somebody who wants something.

• • •

And once that has flipped, everything you say is heard differently.

• • •

Your best argument becomes a sales pitch.

Your good intention becomes a technique.

• • •

I once called a client four times about the same proposal.

• • •

The fourth time he didn't pick up.

• • •

I thought at the time that he was being rude.

• • •

I now know he was doing exactly what I had taught him.

• • •

That I wasn't calling to hear how things stood.

I was calling to close something.

• • •

He heard that.

I didn't.

• • •

Remember the campfire?

• • •

There, everybody knew exactly what to do.

Look at what's missing.

• • •

Here we do the opposite.

• • •

And we do it with total conviction, in meeting rooms, with budget, with deadlines and with the best of intentions.

Why nobody stops

That leaves one question.

• • •

If this is so obvious, why doesn't anybody stop?

• • •

I think there are two reasons, and neither is stupid.

• • •

The first: stopping looks like giving up.

• • •

At a campfire you're allowed to crouch down and look.

At work you aren't.

• • •

Somebody who says "*I'm going to do nothing for a moment and first work out what's missing here*" sounds like somebody without a plan.

• • •

Somebody who says "*I'll chase it again*" sounds like somebody with persistence.

• • •

Almost every organisation rewards what is visible.

• • •

And looking isn't visible.

• • •

The second: a match is measurable.

• • •

You can count how many proposals went out.
How many times you followed up.
How many presentations you gave.

...

You can't count how well you looked.

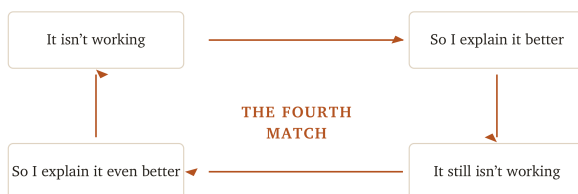
...

So we measure what we can count.

...

And what we measure is what people do.

THE FOURTH MATCH



Nobody in this loop is being lazy.

Everybody is working harder on the wrong thing.

DESIGN FLAW #1

We like to improve the execution.

When the design should have been replaced long ago.

...

From that moment on I stopped looking for better arguments.

• • •

I started looking for the missing condition.

• • •

That sounds like a small shift.

• • •

It's the biggest one I ever made.

• • •

Because as long as you're looking for a better argument, you're still working on your side of the table.

• • •

The moment you look for what's missing, you're looking at his.

THE CLOSING QUESTION

You probably think this chapter was about matches.

It wasn't.

• • •

It was about the question this book is about from here on.

Because if working harder doesn't fix it...

...what does?

• • •

Up to here we have been discovering.

From here we start to understand.

"The fourth match is never for the fire. It's for you."

— Greg Trinidad

What you know now

People don't move because they've been convinced.

• • •

A decision only comes about when stake, trust and urgency are present at the same time.

Take one away and nothing happens — however many matches you use.

And almost everybody responds to that by doing more of the same.

• • •

That is more than it sounds.

• • •

You now have a diagnosis.

• • •

The next time a conversation stalls, you can ask yourself one question you didn't have six months ago.

• • •

Which of the three is missing here?

• • •

Only you'll notice something the moment you start asking it.

• • •

You usually do know *which* one is missing.

You don't yet know what to do about it.

What you don't know yet

Because there's a catch that I deliberately left alone in Part I.

• • •

The three conditions are not equal.

• • •

You can't create urgency in somebody who feels no stake.

You can't build trust while you're busy convincing.

And you can't ask for a first step before the other two are there.

• • •

There's an order to it.

• • •

Anyone who reverses that order gets exactly what most people get: a conversation that went well, and then silence.

• • •

And that is what Part II does.

• • •

There we take the three conditions apart.

What stake really is, and why it is almost always something a person can lose.

Why you can't ask for trust but you can design it.

Why delay is logical behaviour and not laziness.

And why the first step has to be small — much smaller than you think.

• • •

At the end of Part II you'll know something most people never learn.

• • •

That the order matters more than the arguments.

• • •

And after that it gets genuinely practical.

• • •

Part III covers nine fields where exactly the same pattern shows up: sales, leadership, sustainability, negotiation, innovation, recruitment, project management, strategy — and yourself.

• • •

Part IV gives you the tools to do it.

What I should have learned

There is one more thing I have to say here, and I'm not proud of it.

• • •

It took me years to work this out.

• • •

I've had thousands of conversations.

Given presentations.

Taken courses.

Read books.

• • •

And all that time I thought I had to get better at convincing.

• • •

While I should have been learning something else entirely.

• • •

Looking.

• • •

That sounds almost too simple.

• • •

Try it, then.

• • •

Think back to the last time somebody tried to convince you.

• • •

A salesperson.

A colleague.

A family member.

A politician.

• • •

How did that feel?

• • •

Exactly.

• • •

Nobody enjoys being convinced.

• • •

But everybody enjoys working something out for themselves.

• • •

That is a world of difference.

• • •

And maybe that is precisely where decision-making really begins.

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Not with the speaker.

But with the listener.

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Not with the solution.

But with the environment.

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Not with arguments.

But with circumstances.

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I've come to believe that people are far more logical than we think.

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It's just that we often design an environment that isn't.

FIRE INSIGHT

People are rarely the problem.

The environment they have to decide in usually is.

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Maybe resistance doesn't exist at all.

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Maybe all we're seeing is the consequence of an environment where the fire can't start yet.

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But begin with the question you can already ask.

• • •

At the next conversation that doesn't run.

• • •

Not: *how do I convince him?*

But: **where is the fire missing?**

"Whoever learns to look at circumstances stops judging people."

— Greg Trinidad

THAT WAS PART I

You've just read the first part of The Fire Triangle.

• • •

Six chapters.

• • •

And if it did its job, there's a question in your head now that wasn't there an hour ago.

What you have

A diagnosis.

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The next time a conversation stalls, you can ask yourself something you couldn't ask last week.

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Which of the three is missing here?

• • •

That's more than most people ever learn.

And you can use it tomorrow.

What's in the rest of the book

The full book has thirty chapters, in four parts.

• • •

Part II — The Fire Path

There we take the three conditions apart. What stake really is, and why it's almost always something a person can lose. Why you can't ask for trust but you can design it. Why delay is logical behaviour and not laziness. And why the first step has to be small — much smaller than you think.

• • •

By the end of that part you'll know something most people never learn: **that the order matters more than the arguments.**

• • •

Part III — Where it shows up

Nine fields with exactly the same pattern. Sales, leadership, sustainability, negotiation, innovation, recruitment, project management, strategy — and finally yourself.

• • •

With the stories that go with them: a casino in 1985, a marketing failure at Eurostar that cost hundreds of millions, and a bank without branches in Ethiopia.

• • •

Part IV — Become the firemaker

The tools. A diagnosis that fits on one page. A way to design a conversation before you're in it. Four situations to test your own judgement against. Exercises for your team and checklists for the road.

And honestly

I'm not going to tell you that you should buy the book.

• • •

That would be strange, after six chapters about why convincing doesn't work.

• • •

So do this instead.

• • •

Take the next conversation that doesn't run.
Ask yourself that one question before you think of anything to say.

• • •

Where is the fire missing?

• • •

If that gets you something, you know where the rest is.

• • •

And if it doesn't, you spent an afternoon on it and lost nothing.

THE FULL BOOK

The Fire Triangle — Why people really start moving

• • •

Thirty chapters. Four parts.

• • •

firetrianglebook.com