The trusted way

Adopted by Rotary 80 years ago, The Four-Way Test remains an unsurpassed guide to making sound ethical decisions

By Patrick Galvin



Illustration by Kelli Laderer

I took over as president of my family's furniture company in 1996, a newly minted MBA with dreams of streamlining our operations and expanding the business through strategic moves. Instead, I spent the better part of my days mediating disputes between employees, cajoling vendors into making good on their promises, and deescalating tensions between salespeople and dissatisfied customers. I remember frequently asking myself, "What's the right thing to do?"

In 2002, I left to start my own company. The first year was tough, and revenue was lower than I expected. For that reason, I was thrilled when the founders of a well-funded startup called me. They were interested in having my company market a naturopathic pill that they had developed to cure a wide range of maladies. When I asked to see the data, however, I felt chagrined to learn that there was no credible scientific evidence to back up the product's health benefits.

Once again, I asked myself, "What's the right thing to do?" Without a decision-making framework to rely on, I waited a week and lost precious hours of sleep before turning down what would have been a lucrative client engagement. Had I been a member of Rotary at the time, I would have immediately walked away from the project since it violated each tenet of The Four-Way Test. Ultimately, I did the right thing — and was grateful for the ethical education that accompanied my decision making.

More than a decade later, I took what I had learned from running a successful company and wrote my first book, *The Connector's Way: A Story About Building Business One Relationship at a Time.* After its publication, I had the opportunity to speak to organizations around the world. I particularly enjoyed the chance to meet readers who told me how they had applied the concepts from the book. But I also encountered readers who confessed that the ideas in my book were not as effective as they had hoped.

I wanted to learn why. Based on conversations and research, I concluded that the primary determinant in succeeding at relationship building is an individual's ability to instill trust in others. People who seek relationships to get something, such as a sale or a referral, without first developing a solid base of trust are commonly perceived as manipulative. In contrast, those who develop trust create a solid web of strong relationships that lead to personal and professional success.

In March 2020, the global pandemic halted in-person speaking and traveling opportunities. Suddenly grounded, I started considering what a sequel to *The Connector's Way* might feature. As I thought about potential story lines, I came across a quote from the motivational speaker and author Zig Ziglar: "If people like you, they'll listen to you, but if people trust you, they'll do business with you." That quote, along with my own observations about trust-based relationships, inspired me to write *The Trusted Way: A Story About Building a Life and Business of Character.*

Sticking with the parable format I employed in *The Connector's Way,* this new book tells the story of a fictional Brad Parsons, a brash, young entrepreneur whose burning ambition is to earn as much money as possible in the shortest amount of time. He will do anything to succeed, even it means breaking rules and sacrificing relationships. In that way he's a composite of the morally and ethically challenged individuals who make headlines every day. Fortunately, Brad has something that these other ethical transgressors do not: He has a connection to members of Rotary, and through them, to The Four-Way Test.

I like to tell people that I'm not that creative of a writer, and it's true: Much of the wisdom that Brad learns and uses to turn his life around is based on my experience as a member of Rotary. When I joined the Rotary Club of Portland, Oregon, in 2012, I had an aha moment when I stood with fellow club members at my first meeting and recited The Four-Way Test. It was the rediscovery of an important ethical yardstick that I heard for the first time in 1988 when I was a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar at the University of São Paulo in Brazil. I didn't give it much thought back then, but 24 years later, life's challenges had made me realize the utility of The Four-Way Test.

Since the publication of *The Trusted Way,* I've spoken about The Four-Way Test at live and virtual events to thousands of Rotary members in a dozen countries. On every occasion, I hear inspiring stories from people who are eager to share how The Four-Way Test has helped them deal with life's challenges.

On the other hand, and far too often, it can be easy to take The Four-Way Test for granted. As members of Rotary, we see it on the coffee cups we drink from every day, on our club banners when we meet weekly, and monthly in the pages of this magazine (page 58). But outside of Rotary, which officially adopted The Four-Way Test in 1943, it remains little known. For instance, when I told a friend that I was writing a parable based on The Four-Way Test, he looked confused and asked, "Why?" In his mind, The Four-Way Test was a traffic law governing the right-of-way rules at a four-way intersection.

That's why it's so important to share The Four-Way Test with family, friends, and colleagues. Consisting of only 24 words, it is refreshingly simple — and ideally suited for our information-overloaded times. For instance, my 14-year-old daughter and I have had fascinating conversations about "the things we think, say, or do," with The Four-Way Test providing sound guidance for the ethical decisions that teenagers and adults alike need to make every day.

Occasionally, I'll hear from people who think that The Four-Way Test is too simple or who object to one or more of its parts. I'll ask whether they have found a better ethical measuring stick, and rarely do they offer an alternative. A few have shared ideas for changing the verbiage of The Four-Way Test, and while there is no way to know exactly how its creator, the late Herbert J. Taylor, would react to modifications, I'm guessing he would be pleased that people are thinking seriously about how to act ethically.

Just as his Rotary mentors taught Brad Parsons how to use The Four-Way Test to make ethical decisions, it is up to us to share that wisdom with others. In doing so, we remind the world that civility and sound decisions do not require multipage ethics statements drafted by lawyers. The only thing ethical decision making requires is a desire to do the right thing and a simple test that brings out the best in every person who uses it. ■

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