

Safety in Numbers



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As a child I saw the “upside” and “downside” in the number three. Being one of three children increased my odds of finding a sibling compatriot for innocent fun or mischief. If one sister was unavailable, the other could likely be roped into playing *Monopoly* or ping pong or a scheme to annoy the third. But three was rarely a magic number when it came to “hanging out” with friends. Whenever three were gathered, one wound up feeling left out.

If you’ve been out and about lately you’ve probably noticed that warm temperatures are the perfect excuse for motorcycle enthusiasts to leave their four-wheeled toys in the garage or driveway. This week I had an opportunity to attend an event sponsored by the International Norton Owners Association. After a morning of drenching rain and a gloomy forecast for the afternoon, Mother Nature proved the pessimists wrong and the sun emerged from behind the clouds. The opportunity to explore the country roads in the lovely towns adjacent to the Catskill Mountains was impossible to resist.

My Dad, his friend Bob and I climbed aboard our classic bikes and headed out. It wasn’t long before I realized that there was magic in three. The first rider led the way and assumed responsibility for navigating the route to Gilboa Dam. As the second and least experienced rider my job was to set the pace. The riders in front and behind adjusted their speeds to accommodate me. My Dad brought up the rear riding his Norton Commando. “Bringing up the rear” seemed the least interesting spot until the ride reached a surprising climax. While glancing at the side mirror on my 1964 Norton Electra, I noticed a blur of red lights. I wore a puzzled look as the state trooper approached. He smiled and asked about the absence of a license plate on my Norton. My Dad approached and explained: “It fell off about a mile back, but I stopped to pick it up!”

Three to the rescue! Had I ventured out alone or as one of two riders my license plate would be lost and my beautiful bike would be stranded in an impound lot. Three wound up being a magic number for me on this particular ride. “Safety in numbers” is an easy to remember and simple-to-apply risk management technique that can become intuitive over time. Groups add safety for innumerable reasons. Examples that come to mind include:

- The benefit of a second and third “set of eyes” examining this month’s financial statements before they are presented to the board of directors;
- Inviting two or more stakeholder groups for feedback before launching a new initiative that might bring controversy in addition to mission-advancing benefit;

- Requiring that a third, “neutral party” attend a meeting with an employee or volunteer whose performance has made it necessary for discipline or termination; and
- Adopting the “rule of three” in a youth serving organization to reduce the likelihood of inappropriate contact and protect adult leaders from false accusations.

As you wrestle with the risks facing your organization and look for practical ways to inject a dose of safety into your programs, don’t forget the simple concept of “safety in numbers.” True, adding people to the mix in any activity may increase the time it takes to get things done. But the benefit of the additional perspectives you gain may help you identify and therefore avoid potential missteps and save time and resources in the long run.

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