

THE DRAMA TRIANGLE

As a leader, and within a team, we are constantly communicating with other people. Effective communication is so important and has a direct correlation to how our teams perform.

The aim of good communication is to have all individuals communicating in an adult-to-adult state.

This means being objective and empathetic. Rationalising and being solution-focused. The adult-to-adult state is collaborative and trusting, and in that interaction, no one feels superior to others.

It means that there are no games being played. Eric Berne in the 1950s stated that games are a series of ulterior interactions with a set of the rules that the players unconsciously understand and repeat, which leads to negative thoughts and feelings.

To help put this into context
– let's explore a specific
example of a game –
it's called
The Drama Triangle.

BACKGROUND

The Drama Triangle is both a useful and tried-and-tested psychological tool to help people recognise – and therefore transform – dysfunctional social interactions.

The Drama Triangle belongs to the system of psychotherapy called Transactional Analysis (TA), which was invented by Eric

Berne. It was formulated by one of Berne's students, Stephen Karpman and has now become an integral part of TA.

The Drama Triangle model outlines three ineffective responses or 'positions' that we take when confronted with social conflict: **Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim***.

*NOTE: There are real-life 'rescuers,' such as those with an official role to drive an ambulance or remove children away from neglectful situations. There are also real-life victims – for example, people who have experienced a natural disaster or a road traffic collision that wasn't their fault. And lastly, appropriately appointed persecutors exist in society such as lawyers, judges and the police. The Drama Triangle isn't referring to these examples. Instead, it seeks to explore how people act in 'self-appointed' roles.



3 INEFFECTIVE POSITIONS

- Controlling, rigid, critical and unpleasant, but underneath feel inadequate – like a critical parent
- Blames Victims and criticise Rescuers
- This could be a micromanager who doesn't trust their team, or believe that they are leading this way for the greater good
- BODY LANGUAGE: confrontational stance, finger pointing, loud, aggressive or intimidating

- VERBAL LANGUAGE: 'It's all your fault', 'You can't do anything right'
- PERSECUTES TO FEEL SUPERIOR

PERSECUTOR



- Takes care of people without being asked – loves to be needed
- Disparages other people's skills
- 'Help' others to the detriment of their health and well-being

RESCUER



- Could use guilt to get others to comply with their wishes
- May lack boundaries and be unable to complete a task
- By rescuing the Victim, they are maintaining the dysfunction
- BODY LANGUAGE: Looking tired or exhausted, carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders
- VERBAL LANGUAGE: 'Here, let me help you', 'You can't do it on your own'

IS HELPFUL TO FEEL SUPERIOR

VICTIM



- Disparages oneself
- Likely to blame themselves and the Persecutor
- Feels helpless and hopeless, rejects, complains, manipulates

- Doesn't take responsibility for their actions or life circumstance
- BODY LANGUAGE: Hunched over, avoiding eye contact, 'sulky' facial expressions, looking 'moody' or childlike

- VERBAL LANGUAGE: 'It's not my fault', 'This always happens to me', 'I can't'

AVOIDS RESPONSIBILITY TO FEEL INFERIOR

TRIANGLE ORIENTATION

The inverted design of the triangle shows Rescuer and Persecutor occupying the top two positions on the points of the triangle. A deliberate choice, to visually communicate

the idea that both are in a 'one up' position from Victim, who always resides at the bottom. There is a clear power imbalance here.

JUICY NUGGETS

- The Rescuer and the Victim bond over their shared dislike for what the Persecutor is asking for.
- It's been suggested that the role you least identify with is the one that you are most triggered by.
- To a greater or lesser degree, we all play the role of Victim, Rescuer or Persecutor at one time or another. In fact, much more often than we realise. We all have the potential to take all of the positions at some point during our interactions with others.
- Number of players: The Drama Triangle needs at least two players and can have many people. There could be multiple triangles interacting. For example, consider the bully in the playground, as the Persecutor, but in another triangle, they could be the Victim.
- Once you recognise the Drama Triangle, you will see it everywhere: schools, work, family, films. For example, you can see it on a systemic level in politics. At the time of an election, you as the voter may take on the role of a Victim – poor me, the current government becomes the Persecutor and the new government who wins the election becomes the Rescuer.

HOW DO YOU ESCAPE THE DRAMA TRIANGLE?

It requires self-awareness about which role you are playing and a conscious decision to step back and take responsibility for your own actions and behaviour. You need to break the triangle by shifting positions.



PERSECUTOR

- Look for talents or potential in others and focus on developing that, rather than focusing on what is wrong.
- Have empathy for the Victim, and try and see things from their point of view
- Be assertive, and clear, collaborative and constructive in communication.



RESCUER

- Have faith in others and their abilities.
- Consciously take a step back and allow the Victim to find their own solutions. You are helping them to develop their independence.



VICTIM

- Recognise that you are not powerless, you have choices. The power and abilities you see in others belong to you too.
- Take responsibility for switch to the adult state.
- Recognise your vulnerabilities but use that to create change for yourself.
- Try not to rely on the Rescuer.
- Don't take it personally when interacting with the Persecutor.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What are your overall impressions of the Drama Triangle?

Which of these roles do you more naturally gravitate towards?

What relationships come to mind when you consider The Drama Triangle and why?

If you start in a certain role, where do you end up?

What pulls you into the triangle?

What, if anything have you achieved from acting out this drama?

What could you do differently next time?

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER



Due to its simplicity, the insights gained by understanding the Drama Triangle can stay with people for life.



This is because, once people see for themselves how they are acting out The Drama Triangle and its dysfunctional role with their loved ones, co-workers, friends, and strangers for that matter, they are less likely to respond using old patterns of behaviour.

It is a great tool for helping us to raise self-awareness and can act as a 'go-to' model when we need to step back and analyse what's really going on.

