



Human Resources
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

ESCAPING THE DRAMA TRIANGLE

PRE-WORK: PLEASE COMPLETE THE SURVEY ON PAGE TWO

Understand the roles you play

Drama Triangle Worksheet- What is your Primary role?

Which is your primary role in the drama triangle?

The following are characteristics of each role. Put a check mark next to any of the statements that apply to you.



| Victim | Rescuer | Persecutor |
|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I am not worthy of having good relationships. <input type="checkbox"/> No one understands me. <input type="checkbox"/> I don't feel like I am doing it right. <input type="checkbox"/> I resent others who are happy and successful. <input type="checkbox"/> Other people should make decisions for me. <input type="checkbox"/> I feel alone in this world. <input type="checkbox"/> When others try to help I can only think of reasons why it won't work. <input type="checkbox"/> I fear being abandoned and alone. <input type="checkbox"/> I complain about the way things are. <input type="checkbox"/> I sabotage others when they try to help me. <input type="checkbox"/> I am not good at handling hard things. <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes I act the role of martyr. <input type="checkbox"/> I use the behavior of others against them. | <input type="checkbox"/> I feel the need to help people even when they don't want my help. <input type="checkbox"/> Other people need my help with their problems. <input type="checkbox"/> I like having others depend on me. <input type="checkbox"/> I feel guilty when I say NO. <input type="checkbox"/> I tolerate more than I should. <input type="checkbox"/> I help other people keep secrets. <input type="checkbox"/> I never confront people about their problems I just help them. <input type="checkbox"/> I feel unappreciated; I give and give and give with little being returned. <input type="checkbox"/> My needs are not as important as others. <input type="checkbox"/> I focus on others so I don't have to look at myself. <input type="checkbox"/> I feel superior to most people around me. <input type="checkbox"/> I feel guilty if I don't take care of the problems of others. | <input type="checkbox"/> Others are responsible for my problems. <input type="checkbox"/> Others should listen to me, I am right. <input type="checkbox"/> I don't like feeling powerless. <input type="checkbox"/> I verbally attack others. <input type="checkbox"/> I am passive-aggressive. <input type="checkbox"/> I make sarcastic remarks frequently. <input type="checkbox"/> I feel more powerful than others. <input type="checkbox"/> I am critical to those around me. <input type="checkbox"/> I act like I don't care. <input type="checkbox"/> I tease other relentlessly. <input type="checkbox"/> I make cutting remarks. <input type="checkbox"/> I am blunt. <input type="checkbox"/> I coach those around me to do things a different way. My way! <input type="checkbox"/> I shame others for their mistakes. <input type="checkbox"/> I demand respect from those around me. |

<http://rootstoholdme.com/healing-exercises-worksheets/drama-triangle/>

Learning Objectives

- What the Karpman Drama Triangle is and the traits of each role
- Identify preferences and tendencies in creating or perpetuating the triangle
- How to detect and avoid the triangle & direct communication to build effective relationships

What is the Karpman Drama Triangle?

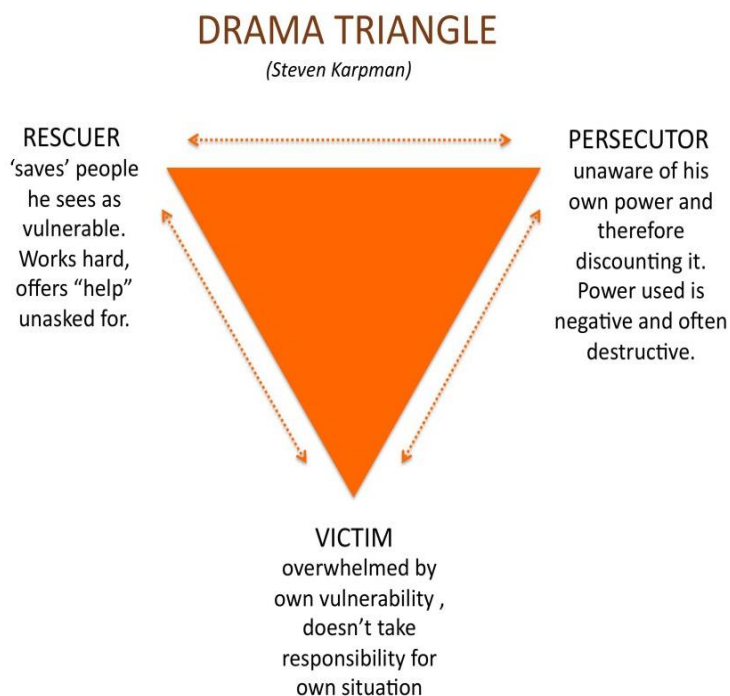
Dr. Stephen B. Karpman developed a social model in 1968 called the Drama Triangle or Victim Triangle. This framework helps us **understand the dysfunctional roles people tend to adopt to deal with conflict**. The Drama Triangle won the Eric Berne Memorial Scientific Award in 1972. You can find his research and original articles [on his website](#).

The cost of drama and unhealthy conflict in the workplace

U.S. Employers spend **2.8 hours each week** dealing with conflict and **2.5 hours a day** dealing with drama. On a team of 10 conflict costs **\$30,000/year** and drama costs **\$130,000/year**. Over 1/3 of employees said that conflict resulted in someone leaving the company, either through firing or quitting. (Wakeman, Cy (2017). No Ego: How Leaders Can Cut the Cost of Workplace Drama, End Entitlement, and Drive Big Results. St. Martin's Press.) Turnover costs are **1.5-2 times the costs of an employee's salary**. Disengaged employees cost the company around **37% of their salary**. (Gallup)

The Drama Triangle illustrates a power game involving three tightly bound roles.

1. The Persecutor
2. The Victim
3. The Rescuer



We are often drawn to one role; however, we typically move around the three roles in conflict during different circumstances. These unhealthy reactions to conflict, differences of opinions, and disagreements in the Drama Triangle hold people back from addressing issues at the root level. The behaviors perpetuate the drama and consume time, are counter-productive and cause frustration, anger, and misery. These hidden agendas and subversive conversations erode communication, trust, and cause great damage to relationships.

The triangle can also take place with just two players. When there are more than three players, several people can play the same role. The Drama Triangle is in motion and never static. The players move quickly and reactively from one role to another and swap between their roles.

While a healthy person will perform in each of these roles occasionally, pathological role-players actively avoid leaving the familiar and comfortable environment of the game. In each case, the Drama Triangle is an instrument of destruction.

The goal is to understand the Drama Triangle, the roles, and how to step out of the triangle to transform this lose-lose situation and create a more positive outcome for everyone.

Characteristics, traits and needs of each role

| Victim | Rescuer | Persecutor |
|---|---|---|
| <p>One whose equilibrium is disturbed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm not OK but everyone else is. • Subjected to the attacks; believe they are "at the effect of" a person or situation • Feels like a persecutor magnet • Undergoing change, struggling against change | <p>Strives to restore equilibrium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You're not OK but I can fix you. • Protector, too good to be true • Servant-knight / mother figure (mother hen) / martyr • Desire to feel good about themselves and capable • Tend to drive the conflict intensity level by how aggressively they respond | <p>Disturbs the equilibrium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You're not OK but I am so do what I tell you. • Attacker, aggressor • Likes to control and is rigid • Innovator, initiator • False sense of superiority • Defensive when things go sour |
| <p>Depends on a savior (rescuer)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not take responsibility for their negative circumstances, feelings, behaviors & performance • Denies possession of the power to change the negative • Very sensitive, wants kid-glove treatment and pretends incompetence • If they aren't being persecuted, they will seek out a persecutor (frequently notes how others are against them, they can't do anything right) • Doesn't take a stand • Do less than 50% | <p>Yearns for a basket-case (victim)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes responsibility for solving others' problems and neglects own • Self-satisfying, psychological need; justified • Harried, tired and often has physical complaints (not taking care of self, neglects own needs) and underlying anger • Does not address the root cause, only solves superficially • Will not coach others and hold them responsible; likes them to keep coming back for help; hidden agenda - needs to be needed • Use guilt to get their way | <p>Needs a scapegoat (victim/rescuer)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holds others responsible, blames the victim & criticizes the rescuer for enabling • Rigid and resentful when others don't live up to their expectations • Critical, unpleasant, and good at finding fault • Sometimes bullies or targets the weaker or under-performers • Provides no guidance, assistance, or a solution to underlying problem • Keeps victim oppressed through threats and bullying |
| <p>Sounds like deflection or defeat</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why does this happen to me? • I guess I must live with it, poor me • It is beyond my control • I'm not responsible for this • I'm overwhelmed, there is no way I can do all this • They think I can't do anything right • Why are they ganging up on me? | <p>Sounds like encouraging the victim</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes! You are so right! • I think so too! I agree! • I'm the only one that knows. • Let me help you. • You need my help. • I can provide background or confidential information about that. Call me first. • Why didn't you include me? • You didn't do what I suggested. | <p>Sounds like justifying their actions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I should never have trusted you • I did not expect this from you • If you would only have done what I told you • I figured this is what would happen if you were in charge • There was such a better way to do it than that |

Situation determines position

A victim who finds victimhood too oppressive can switch to the role of persecutor.

Situation determines position

A rescuer pushed too far by a persecutor will switch to the role of victim or counter-persecutor. A rescuer who builds resentment for being unappreciated can switch to the role of persecutor.

Situation determines position

A persecutor who is admonished by a rescuer on behalf of a victim will switch to the role of victim.

Victim Traits

- Often youngest in the family
- Overprotected by parents or siblings
- Little experience & confidence in managing problems
- Easily overwhelmed and anxious
- Unconfident: believe they can't take care of themselves if they are to escape the triangle
- Under-responsible: Your problems are your problems
- I expect you to fix my problems; I'll wait or manipulate you
- Cannot get too strong or the Rescuer will feel threatened and not needed

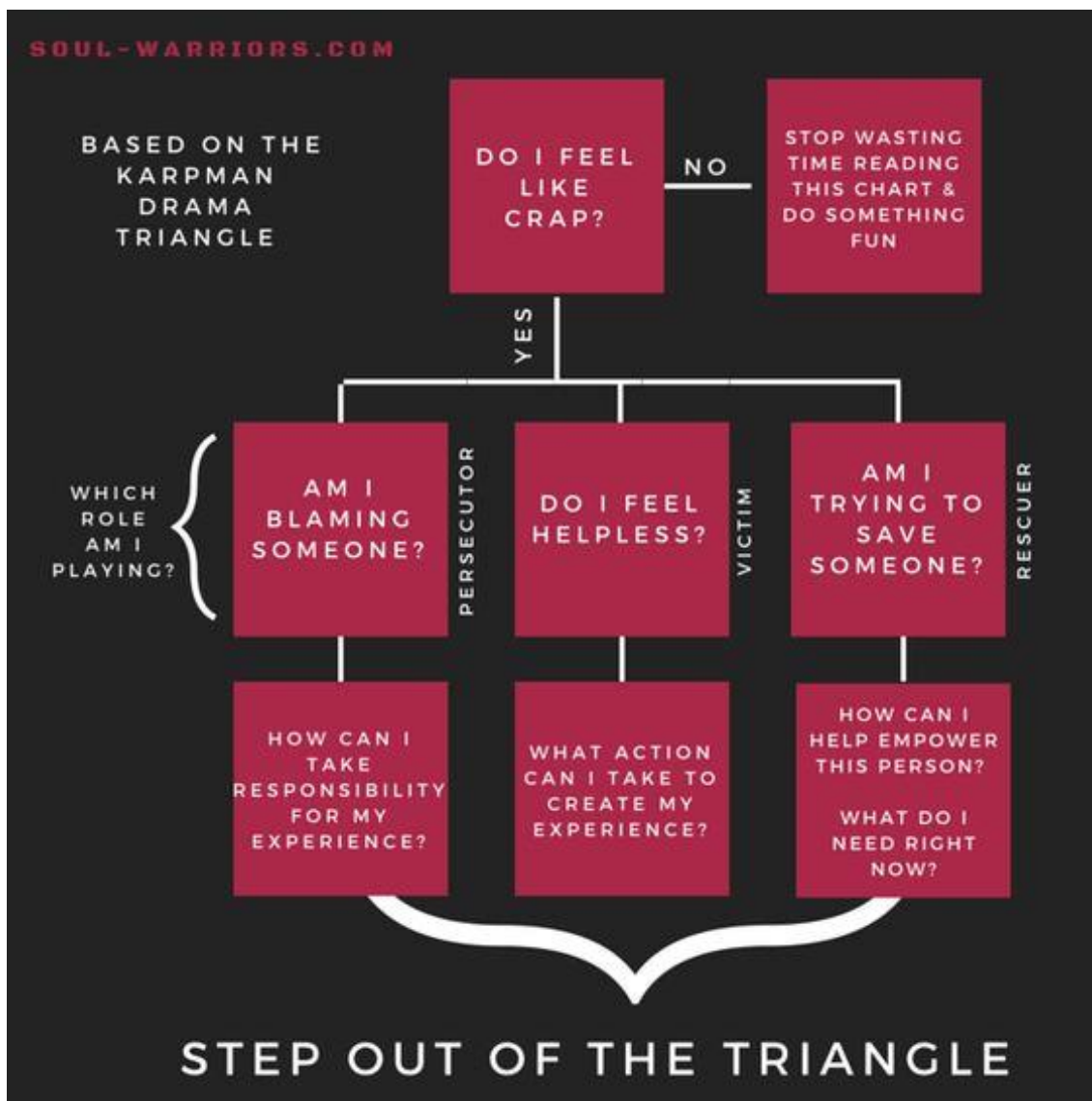
Rescuer Traits

- Only child or oldest
- Grew up in a chaotic family
- Pleaser (avoid conflict by being good), co-dependent, enabling, overly protective
- Sensitive to others' emotions (EI)
- Hyperattentive to ensuring others' happiness; my job to make you happy; not offend others (or critical voice in their head)
- Compartmentalizes conflict until blows up
- Over-responsible: Your problems are my problems
- Identify as a "fixer" and often socially acclaimed, even rewarded for "selfless acts" of caring
- Feels pressure and control
- Cannot be vulnerable because Victim may not be able to handle it
- Afraid of being alone; victim leaving them

Persecutor Traits

- May have been a survivor of some type of abuse or neglect
- Overcomes feelings of personal helplessness and shame by over-powering others
- Deny their vulnerability
- Greatest fear is powerlessness
- Project their inadequacy, fear, and vulnerability
- "The world is hard and mean." I must fight to survive
- Chip on their shoulder; "I'll get you before you get me" or "You deserve what you get"
- Must protect themselves in what they perceive as a hostile world
- Must always be right; may bully, preach, threaten, blame, lecture, interrogating and attacks; behaving/identifying with people who have abused them in this way in their childhood

Traits from: <https://lindagraham-mft.net/triangle-victim-rescuer-persecutor-get/>



Reflection

Which role(s) do you typically play?

Who frequently plays with you and in which roles?

What are the risks or consequences to you personally and professionally if you don't step out of the triangle?

Escaping the drama triangle

BREAK THE CYCLE: CHANGE YOUR ROLE IN THE GAME

Victim → Survivor / Thriver / Creator
With problem solving
Do I feel helpless?

What action can I take to create my experience?

Skill: Problem solving, accept own vulnerability, realize they have power, think about options

- State what you want and act
- Keep agreements: If someone helps, do your part by following through
- Ask yourself: how can I get what I really want in a healthy way?
- Gratitude: acknowledge strengths and what is going well
- Acknowledge their problem solving as well as their leadership capabilities
- Take responsibility for their own feelings, thoughts, and reactions

Rescuer → Coach
With clear support

Am I trying to save someone?
How can I help empower this person?
What do I need right now?

SKILL: Listening, asking good questions, setting boundaries

- Give message: I care about you, and I know you are capable
- Do nothing that others can do for themselves
- Listen actively, without making it yours to solve
- State boundaries
- Provide choices
- Empower rather than disable
- Allow people to make mistakes and learn through sometimes consequences

Persecutor → Challenger
With clear structure

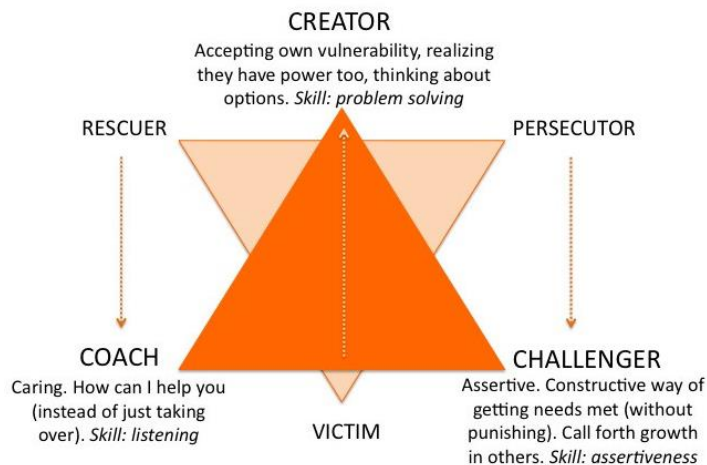
Am I blaming someone?
How can I take responsibility for my experience?

SKILL: Assertiveness, set clear expectations, call forth growth in others

- Self-accountability
- State boundaries: I am willing to listen/work 10 min.
- Provide clear expectations: I need you to keep your agreement; please have it done by Tuesday.
- Provide choices: you want to do like this or like that?
- Build EI and self-regulation
- Work on showing vulnerability, seeking help, asking questions to build trust
- Tell stories about when something was hard for you, or you had to figure something out to be relatable

EMPOWERMENT TRIANGLE

KEY = SELF-AWARENESS



Reflection:

What is it that you need? How can you get what you need?

| BE RESPONSIBLE FOR EVERYTHING YOU THINK, SAY, DO AND FEEL (OWNERSHIP) | VICTIMIZATION | ACCOUNTABILITY |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If something bothers me, it is MY problem. • If there is something I need to tell you, I need to tell YOU. • If I think you may be able to help me with MY solution, I need to ask you. <p>If you decide NOT to help me, I'll need how to figure out how to fix it myself.</p> | <p>Ignore/deny Wait and see Confusion/tell me what to do It's not my job Finger-pointing/blame game</p> | <p>See it Own it Solve it Do it</p> <p>-The Oz Principle</p> |

Strategies to escape the Drama Triangle:

Reflection

What do you need to escape the triangle? How will you go about getting it?

Plan your conflict conversations:

- Use a conversation planner to prepare your thoughts
- Reflect on past conflict conversations with a Left | Right worksheet
- Look for loaded words, bad reactions

Think before you speak

- Is it TRUE?
- Is it HELPFUL?
- Is it INSPIRING?
- Is it NECESSARY?
- Is it KIND?

Beware the open-door policy:

- What types of conversations happen in your space? Look for patterns: venting, rescuing, coaching
 - Venting is the ego's way of avoiding self-reflection
- Ask questions that provide for self-reflection
 - Self-reflection allows for accountability
- Implement a Rule of the Door
 - Open – come in
 - Cracked – have a great need
 - Closed – have an emergency

Have some practiced responses ready for triangulation situations:

- If you are conflict adverse or blurt back defensively in conflict you could benefit from a few prepared responses to buy some time or to stop someone from venting, blaming, or whining
 - Let me think about this and get back with you
 - I might need more information about this, let's talk about it again later
 - I want to make sure we give this proper consideration, let's find another time to talk more
 - My first instinct is to say ... but I want to make sure I have really considered this fully. Can we discuss this when we have more time?

Practice saying “no” and setting boundaries and putting the ball back in their court

- Have you spoken with X directly? If not, “Why not?”
- Are you sure that’s what they meant? What could you ask of them to find out?
- This problem seems to keep popping up. What could you do differently this time for a better outcome?
- What part of this do you think you are responsible for?
- What do you think would be a good first step?
- What exactly do you need from me?

Team strategies to stop triangulation

Create common values statements for teams

- Live them, hire for them, provide feedback around them

Create a coaching culture

- Promote proactive, solution-driven conversations and conflict
- Point out conversations that are stalled

Provide feedback

- Recognize when people change behaviors and reward them with specific, timely feedback
- Address poor behaviors specifically and timely

Create Ground Rules and Working Agreements to guide how you interact with one another

Reflection

What else do you need to do individually or as a team?

Resources

<https://karpmandramatriangle.com/index.html>

http://www.johngouletmft.com/Breaking_The_Drama_Triangle_Newest.pdf

<https://lindagraham-mft.net/triangle-victim-rescuer-persecutor-get/>

<http://rootstoholdme.com/healing-exercises-worksheets/drama-triangle/>

<https://www.drkathryn-kissell.com/resources/karpmans-drama-triangle/>

<https://mindfulme.me/karpmans-drama-triangle-self-empowerment/>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fixing-families/201106/the-relationship-triangle>

http://www.executivecoaching.be/Article_TriangleDramatique_En_1.htm

<https://bpdfamily.com/content/karpman-drama-triangle>

<http://rootstoholdme.com/healing-exercises-worksheets/drama-triangle/>

Wakeman, Cy (2017). No Ego: How Leaders Can Cut the Cost of Workplace Drama, End Entitlement, and Drive Big Results. St. Martin’s Press.