

Breaking the Drama Triangle: Coaching Strategies for Leaders

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Abstract

Leaders who understand Stephen Karpman's Drama Triangle are better equipped to coach individuals toward growth and prevent destructive workplace dynamics. The Drama Triangle, introduced in 1968, identifies three recurring roles in human interaction: Aggressor (criticizes and dominates), Victim (feels powerless and blames others), and Rescuer (intervenes excessively to "save" others). Although these roles are interdependent and fluid, each limits personal accountability and undermines team performance. This article examines the characteristics of each role, explores how

individuals shift between them, and provides practical strategies leaders can use to redirect behavior. By helping Aggressors develop openness, guiding Victims toward responsibility, and teaching Rescuers to set boundaries, leaders can foster collaboration, resilience, and accountability. Importantly, leaders must avoid slipping into the rescuer role themselves—a common trap that perpetuates dependency rather than empowerment. Breaking free from the Drama Triangle requires awareness, intentional coaching, and a commitment to building healthier workplace relationships. Leaders who master this framework not only

reduce unproductive drama but also cultivate stronger, more self-reliant teams.

Introduction

Workplace conflict and interpersonal tension are inevitable, yet the way leaders respond determines whether those challenges lead to growth or destructive cycles of drama. All too often, leaders and team members alike become entangled in patterns of blame, helplessness, or over-involvement that drain energy, reduce productivity, and erode trust. In 1968, Stephen Karpman introduced the Drama Triangle, a simple but powerful framework that explains how people fall into three dysfunctional roles—Aggressor, Victim, and Rescuer—when navigating conflict and stress (Karpman, 1968).

The Drama Triangle has since become a cornerstone in psychotherapy, coaching, and organizational development, offering leaders a lens to recognize unproductive dynamics and redirect them toward healthier interactions. Each role carries its own pitfalls: the Aggressor dominates, the Victim abdicates responsibility, and the Rescuer fosters dependency. Moreover, individuals frequently shift between roles, further complicating team relationships and escalating drama.

For leaders, the real challenge lies not only in identifying these behaviors but also in guiding individuals out of the triangle altogether. Effective coaching involves raising awareness, clarifying expectations, and empowering people to take responsibility for their choices. At the same time, leaders must resist the temptation to

play the Rescuer themselves—a common trap that undermines accountability and reinforces dysfunction.

This article explores the Drama Triangle in depth, outlining the characteristics of each role, examining how individuals move between them, and presenting actionable strategies leaders can apply to break the cycle. By shifting from drama-driven interactions to growth-oriented conversations, leaders can strengthen collaboration, enhance accountability, and create environments where teams thrive.

Understanding the Drama Triangle

Leaders who understand the Drama Triangle are better prepared to coach individuals toward positive change and prevent getting caught up in unproductive drama.

In 1968, Stephen Karpman developed a social model of human interaction, commonly known as the Drama Triangle. It describes three roles that people can take on.

- Aggressor — blames, criticizes, and dominates
- Victim — feels oppressed, helpless, and powerless
- Rescuer — intervenes, often unnecessarily, to save the victim

The three roles are interconnected. The aggressive person creates a victim, and the rescuer jumps in to help the victim. Stephen Karpman once said, “The Victim role is the pivotal role in the Drama Triangle. Without a Victim, there can be no Persecutor and no Rescuer.”

Since its debut in 1968, Karpman's Drama Triangle has been used in psychotherapy, coaching, and organizational development.

Aggressive individuals often seek to dominate and control situations. They are self-proclaimed know-it-alls who frequently interrupt others and tend to be closed-minded. They believe their solution is the only way forward.

Actions to assist aggressive individuals in becoming more effective include:

- 1.Describing their behavior. You talk over people. You interrupted four people during the meeting. You rejected Anthony's idea even before he had a chance to explain it.
- 2.Explain the consequences of their behavior. Aggressive individuals are often unaware of the negative impact their actions have on others. Coach them on the importance of building positive relationships with colleagues.
- 3.Help them become more open-minded. Teach them to pause, listen, and ask questions before reacting.
- 4.Set clear expectations for interpersonal behavior as part of their performance reviews and development plans.

By helping aggressive individuals become more open-minded and less rigid, you enable them to become better collaborators and more effective team members.

Victims are quick to complain, whine, and blame others for their problems. It is never their fault. Their outlook is doom and gloom.

These people often feel powerless, overwhelmed, and unfairly treated. Left unaddressed, this mindset limits productivity and damages morale.

Actions you can take to help victims become more effective include:

- 1.Describe their pessimistic comments and quantify their complaints. Do you realize that in the last 60 seconds, you've mentioned four complaints?
- 2.Focus on the present and future. Victims often relive past events. Encourage them to identify their primary issue and outline their strategies for addressing it. Avoid getting bogged down in the details.
- 3.Clarify expectations and responsibilities. Clearly define roles, duties, and goals — and hold them accountable.
- 4.Encourage them to concentrate on what they can control. They always hold power over their attitude, effort, and actions. Inspire a positive, can-do mindset.
- 5.Recognize and reinforce progress. Celebrate small wins as they take steps toward personal responsibility and productivity. Positive reinforcement builds confidence and fosters the formation of new habits.

By helping victims take responsibility and develop their capabilities, you empower them to become dependable.

Rescuers are highly motivated to help others. They are "people pleasers" and want to be liked and appreciated. Their typical response is, "Yes, I'll help."

Rescuers often overlook the time commitments associated with the various tasks and projects they volunteer to do. They usually take on too much and neglect their primary job responsibilities.

Actions you can take to help rescuers become more effective and productive include:

1. Point out when they are intervening unnecessarily or taking over responsibilities that belong to others.
2. Guide them on the significance of fulfilling their core job responsibilities.
3. Encourage rescuers to provide suggestions to assist the person rather than assuming responsibility for the task.
4. Help them realize the goal is for each team member to be capable, self-reliant, and responsible.
5. Acknowledge their willingness to help, but guide them on the importance of setting appropriate boundaries.

People Move Between Roles

A victim might feel attacked and respond with aggression, becoming an aggressor. A rescuer could feel overwhelmed and unappreciated, possibly adopting a victim role. An aggressive individual may feel guilty and start to act like a rescuer.

Help people understand what is happening and what they need to do.

Also, avoid getting caught in the triangle. A common leadership trap is taking on the rescuer role—constantly solving team

problems instead of empowering individuals to resolve their own issues.

Which role do you tend to slip into? What actions will you take to be more effective?

Your Challenge

The first thing leaders need to do is help people become more aware of the roles they are playing and the impact those roles have on themselves and others.

Every workplace has its share of Aggressors, Victims, and Rescuers. The question is: Will you keep the drama going or be the leader who breaks the cycle?

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Biography:

Paul B. Thornton is an author and speaker. His most popular books include Add Value-- Improve the Status Quo, Leadership Styles, The Leadership Process, and Organizational Alignment to Achieve Peak Performance.

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