Drama Triangle

The Drama Triangle is a model of unhealthy relationships, developed by the psychiatrist Stephen Karpman in nineteen sixty-eight. It shows three roles that people often take, without noticing, during conflict or stress: the Victim, the Persecutor and the Rescuer. Each role feels natural in the moment, but together they keep the drama going. Trust falls, problems stay unsolved, and work slows down. The good news is that these are roles, not personalities, so anyone can step out of them.

1. The Victim

The Victim feels powerless, helpless or stuck. Life seems to happen to them, and they wait for someone else to fix it. They complain a lot, but they avoid taking ownership of the problem. They may seem harmless, but they drain the energy of the whole team. Their motto is: poor me.

Example: a student fails a test and blames the teacher, instead of asking how to study better.

At work: Alex often complains about unrealistic deadlines, but he never suggests a solution. The team has to cover his work, and morale drops.

2. The Persecutor

The Persecutor controls others through criticism, blame or intimidation. They focus on who is wrong, not on what went wrong. This creates fear, so people hide their mistakes and stop taking risks. Sometimes the Persecutor is right about the problem, but wrong about the way. Their motto is: it's all your fault.

Example: a parent shouts at a child for a broken glass, before asking what happened.

At work: a manager, Lisa, scolds Mark in front of the whole team for a missed deadline. Mark feels ashamed, and the others stop speaking up.

3. The Rescuer

The Rescuer jumps in to solve other people's problems, often without being asked. The intention seems kind, but it keeps others weak and dependent. Rescuers often say yes to

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everything, because being needed makes them feel valuable. Over time, the Rescuer feels tired and unappreciated. Their motto is: let me fix it for you.

Example: a father finishes his son's homework every night, so the son never learns to do it alone.

At work: a senior manager, Sarah, keeps finishing Mia's tasks and protects her from any criticism. Mia never grows, and Sarah is heading for burnout.

4. How the Roles Switch

The drama never stands still, because people move around the triangle. A Rescuer who feels used can suddenly turn into a Persecutor. A Persecutor who is challenged can quickly feel like a Victim. Often, the same person plays all three roles in a single day. This constant switching is what makes the drama so hard to stop.

Example: one day, Sarah loses patience and shouts at Mia. Now Sarah is the Persecutor, Mia feels like a Victim, and a colleague rushes in to rescue her.

5. The Empowerment Triangle

To break free, each drama role can be replaced by a healthy one, from a model called the Empowerment Triangle. The Victim becomes a Creator, who takes ownership and asks: what can I do? The Persecutor becomes a Challenger, who gives clear, constructive feedback and sets high standards. The Rescuer becomes a Coach, who supports others with good questions, so they find their own solutions.

Example: the student asks the teacher for feedback, the parent calmly asks what happened, and the father asks his son where he is stuck.

At work: Alex brings a plan to prioritize his tasks. Lisa talks to Mark privately and asks what got in the way. And Sarah asks Mia: what options have you considered?

Conclusion

In summary, the Drama Triangle explains why some conflicts go round in circles. The Victim, the Persecutor and the Rescuer all keep the problem alive, even with good intentions. When you notice your own role, you can choose to step out and become a Creator, a Challenger or a Coach. Great leaders do not rescue, blame or carry the load alone; they help others grow.

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