Transactional Analysis - Parent, Adult, Child

Transactional Analysis is a way of understanding how people talk to each other. It was developed by the psychiatrist Eric Berne in the 1950s and became famous through his book Games People Play, published in 1964. Berne said that each of us has three ego states: Parent, Adult and Child. An ego state is a set of thoughts, feelings and behaviours that we move into, often without noticing. When we can name the ego state behind a message, we can choose a better answer.

1. The Parent

The Parent ego state holds the rules, values and habits that we copied from parents, teachers and other adults when we were young. It often sounds like should, must or always. The Parent can be caring, when it protects and encourages others. It can also be critical, when it judges, blames or gives orders. Both forms are useful in the right place, but too much criticism makes others feel small.

Example: In the park, a father speaks from the caring Parent and tells his son to put on his jacket because the wind is cold. The boy feels looked after and puts it on.

At work: Rami, a project coordinator, hears his manager say that the report is late again, as always. He recognises the critical Parent ego state behind the words. Because he names it, he stays calm instead of feeling like a schoolboy.

2. The Adult

The Adult ego state deals with the here and now. It collects facts, weighs options and solves problems, a little like a calm computer. It does not blame and it does not sulk; it asks what is true and what can be done. The Adult is not about age; even a child can think in this way. At work, the Adult is usually the best place to start a difficult conversation.

Example: Two friends plan a holiday from the Adult ego state. They compare prices, dates and the weather forecast before they choose. The decision is calm, and both are happy with it.

At work: Rami answers his manager from the Adult. He explains that the sales figures arrived only on Thursday, and that the report will be ready by noon tomorrow. The manager's tone softens, and he agrees to the new time.

3. The Child

The Child ego state holds the feelings and reactions we had as children. The free Child is curious, creative, playful and spontaneous. The adapted Child learned to fit in, so it may obey, please

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others, sulk or rebel. Like the other states, the Child is not good or bad in itself. It brings energy and fun, but it needs the Adult nearby when decisions matter.

Example: At a family party, a grandfather lets his free Child out and plays football with his grandchildren. Everyone laughs, and the party becomes the best one of the year.

At work: In a brainstorming meeting, Rami uses his free Child and draws a bold, funny idea for the product launch. The team laughs, and then improves it. After some careful Adult checks, the idea becomes the new campaign.

4. Complementary and Crossed Transactions

A transaction is one message and the answer to it. In a complementary transaction, the answer comes from the ego state that was addressed, for example Adult to Adult. Then the conversation can go on smoothly. In a crossed transaction, the answer comes from an unexpected ego state, and communication often breaks down. To repair a crossed transaction, one person can move back to the Adult and invite the other to join.

Example: A man calmly asks his wife where the car keys are, as one Adult to another. She answers like a hurt Child that he always blames her. This crossed transaction turns a small question into a quarrel, until he calmly repeats that he only needs the keys.

At work: Rami asks the manager, Adult to Adult, which part of the report matters most for the board. The manager answers from the Adult too: the sales forecast. This complementary transaction keeps the talk short, friendly and useful.

Conclusion

In summary, Transactional Analysis describes three ego states: Parent, Adult and Child. Every message and its answer form a transaction, which can be complementary or crossed. When we notice which ego state is speaking, in others and in ourselves, we can choose our answer instead of simply reacting. Often, the most useful choice is to step into the Adult and invite others to do the same.

Sources

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