The Drama Triangle

Stephen Karpman's Triangle and K-Formula

Para consultar este texto en español

The Drama Triangle, or Karpmann's Triangle of Transactional Analysis fame is a powerful conceptual tool to understand personal and professional manipulation strategies and to provide solutions to these negative processes. It is widely known and well documented in numerous articles and books. Except for a few original systemic twists, the presentation of this tool here could be redundant or yet another tribute to Stephen Karpmann who invented it. We also choose to present the Drama Triangle here for younger coaches are not very familiar with the concept and to consider useful and appropriate coaching techniques and and possible original responses.

The "K-formula" from the same author also merits as much attention on the part of communication professionals and coaches for its pertinence in establishing contracts in general, and coaching agreements in particular. The K-formula is unfortunately less well-known and less mentioned in publications. It is introduced farther below to give coaches yet another simple and powerful conceptual tool which has also proven useful when establishing contracts and co-designing coaching-agreements.

THE DRAMA OR KARPMANN'S TRIANGLE

Before presenting Karpmann's Triangle, or the Drama Triangle, it is useful to remember that the concept stands among other Transactional Analysis tools covering manipulation strategies first presented by Eric Berne, (Games People Play Ballantine Books, Toronto, 1973). Consequently, to understand the T.A. context within which the Drama Triangle plays an important part, it is also useful to have a good understanding of the G-formula developed in Eric Berne's book, as well as the K-formula presented further below.

Historically, these developments on manipulation games were first introduced in the 1950's decade. Those years are considered to be a heroic period during which the foundations of Transactional Analysis were developed. This is useful to remember so as to understand the relatively revolutionary dimension of the Drama Triangle. At the time, the concept mapped-out dynamic interactions between three or more protagonists within a complex if not systemic context. At the time, most theories on communication often simplified interactions to dual and more static relationships in stimulus-response descriptions between a grand maximum of two partners. The more complex Drama Triangle can therefore be considered a form of historical breakthrough.

In the '50s, this concept opened new horizons in the limited binary theoretical environment which understood relationships and communication in a binary way. Such concepts as transactions, life positions, symbiosis, stimulus-response, etc could now be considered simplistic. We can immagine that the Drama Triangle was a breakthrough concept that could have stimulated developments in other theories, introducing complexity in our understanding of communication processes.

Notice indeed that not only the Drama triangle dynamically positions at least three actors on an interactive stage, but it also mentions:

- That an active or apparently passive public actually plays an active part, influencing relational outcomes,
- That all the roles can be exchanged or rotated between the actors in the course of an interaction, and more surprisingly,
- That each actor can actually assume several roles simultaneously, on different levels of consciousness.

These considerations reveal that the Drama Triangle is a theory familiar with the underlying presence of complexity in relationships. It has its place in an conceptual environment similar to Systems Analysis, a much more modern, all inclusive and dynamic theoretical construct.

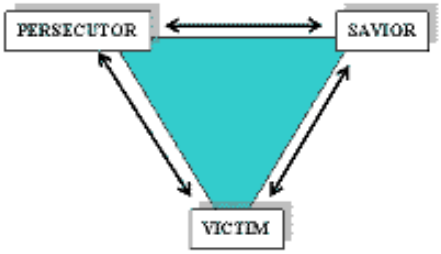
It is possible that the precocious appearance of the Drama Triangle in Transactional Analysis theory has helped that body of knowledge develop its dynamic dimension, and is partly responsible for its undeniable success. One could also consider that the Drama Triangle is not innocent to later development of another powerful triangular concept in Transactional Analysis: the Triangular Contract.

This introduction underlines numerous reasons to value the Drama Triangle. It may explain why that concept is today among the most popularized and useful theoretical tools in relationship professions, including coaching.

Three roles interact in the Drama Triangle (in the Greek meaning of the word of drama or theatrical): The Persecutor, the Savior, and the Victim. Traditionally, these three roles are presented in the Drama Triangle with capital letters to underline they are to be differentiated from everyday terms that refer to very occasional and very real victims, saviors and persecutors.

Consequently the roles in the Drama Triangle refer to people who seem to regularly and almost existentially assume precise interactive positions, even if they claim they do it subconsciously or unwillingly. According to Drama Triangle theory these are recurrent roles people play with social, psychological and existential motivations and objectives which cannot be explained away by accidental coincidence.

These three roles are originally represented the following way by Stephen Karpmann.



- **Note:** The apparently superior positions of the Persecutor and Savior, illustrate their intrinsic power or capacity to dominate the Victim. The Drama Triangle positions these two roles as top dogs compared to the Victim who is positioned as the underdog. The Victim, underdog role is usually favored by unknowing crowds in most popular novels, plays, movies and children stories.

The Victim corresponds to System Analysis "lower positioning". This is where one should be more discriminating, for Systems Analysis stipulates that the lower position is one of unsuspected strength. The Victim can be indeed perceived as actually running the show in the Drama Triangle. Without a Victim, the two other roles hardly have reason to exist or to meet. They simply loose their purpose. Indeed, what can a helpful Savior or bullying Persecutor do without a Victim to justify their presence? Consequently as Systems Analysis would have it, the Victim wields the particular interactive power characteristic of a systemic low position. It practically controls the play's script.

Concerning the Victim role's real power, Karpmann told the story that when Eric Berne was first presented the Drama Triangle, he suggested that Stephen should redesign his triangle the other way around and position the Victim on top, in a more powerful position compared to the other two. Karpmann admits he refused Berne's suggestion.

THE "YES BUT" GAME AND KARPMANN'S TRIANGLE

To illustrate the interactive complexity revealed by the Drama Triangle, consider the well-known game of “Yes, but” (note that in T.A., names for specific games are put in quotation marks): one person initiates a discussion with another, asking for help to solve an apparently difficult problem. -“How do you think I could get better results in my field?”

- **Caution:** This request could come from a Victim looking for a Savior, but all requests for help are not attempts to play “Yes, but”.

Considering that it takes at least two to play the game, the Victim’s targeted helper could then bite on the bait, hook and line, and respond with an obvious helpful suggestion, for example: -“Well, you could start by limiting expenses.”

Note that this response implicitly disqualifies the person asking for help. The underlying message could be: -“You obviously aren’t doing your job correctly. I'll demonstrate that I am more competent than you”.

Indeed, one can often get the feeling that although apparently helping out, an eager helper or Savior is actually putting down or persecuting the Victim by pointing out the latter’s limits or lack of competencies. In this case, the apparent Savior response is both concealng and revealing he or she is actually a potential Persecutor.

The helpless partner in the relationship can then add complexity to the situation and turn the tables by answering: -" Yes, sure. I’ve been there. But if I lower my expenses any more, I might as well starve.”

The apparent Victim reveals that the problem has already been well thought out and that the apparent Savior will not be able to easily produce a valid or acceptable solution. In fact, The Victim may start persecuting the Savior by systematically refusing all proposed options with consecutive "Yes, buts". The Victim may be indirectly telling the Savior: -“If you think I’m so stupid, I’ll demonstrate that you don’t have any valid options, try all you may”.

And the game can go on its course with numerous coups de theatre, surprises, dismissals and turnabouts, knowing that in the final analysis, there will be no sustainable winner.

Proposing the "Yes, but" game as an illustration in this article is not a coincidence. It is probably the most common game in most communication and consulting professions including coaching. Considering this, one should always remember that it always takes two to tango. When a coach and client play this game, there is a high probability that the coach is either too involved in the content of the client's problem or issue, or perceived as such by the client. The "Yes, but" game demonstates that the prefered role for a coach or other support professional to enter the Drama Traingle is the Savior.

- **Caution:** There are also occurences when the client plays "Yes, but" all by him or herself, for instance by offering an option and then immediately arguing against it's viability.

Indeed, the coaching context stipulates that coaches help clients find their own options and solutions by providing an appropriate exploring, learning, decision-making and planning environment, without providing answers. Consequently, whenever clients formulate a phrase mentioning a "yes, but", or any equivalent expression or attitude, the coach should understand it as an invitation to urgently recover an appropriate coaching position.

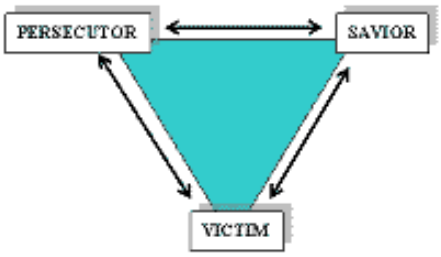
DRAMA TRIANGLE CHARACTERISTICS

The arrows between the three roles in the Drama Triangle may represent:

- Interactions between three roles which could be held by three different actors engaged in communication or relationship,
- Changes in the apparent roles (social level) held by any or all these actors
- By extension, communication between three parts of one same person who could assume all three Drama Triangle roles as three distinct dimensions of an internal personal reality.

Consequently, the Karpmann Triangle model is fundamentally dynamic, revealing diffenent levels of a complex reality. One person's capacity to assume one role in the triangle automatically implies that person can or will switch roles at least once in the course of the interaction. Holding one role implies a capacity to hold at least another one if not both other positions. Consequently,

- A Persecutor has been or will sooner or later become a Victim or a Savior.
- A Savior has been or will transform into a Persecutor, Victim or both.
- A Victim may have been or will become a Savior or Persecutor.



- There are often specialized Victims. Some prefer to interact with Persecutors, regularly attempting to establish tough, rebellious and conflicting relationships with their communication partners.

Although claiming to be Victims, some people can also be perceived as second-level Persecutors. Others more helpless, distraught, passive or fumbling Victims prefer to interact with Saviors such as in the "Yes, but" example presented above. On a social level, they are openly looking for help, support, solutions and advice, sometimes later becoming Persecutors or Saviors.

Quick intuition based on client general attitude, posture, eye contact tone of voice, etc. can provide coaches with clear advance indication of the type of Drama Triangle roles each client may prefer, and the type of complementary role the coach may unwittingly play. This advance knowledge can be an excellent occasion for supervision work on the coach's part.

- Active game players are rarely fully conscious of playing their part in the Drama Triangle. Game players often identify themselves with a deeper psychological position representing another role. For instance, most Persecutors often really believe they are Victims.

These Persecutors firmly believe their perceived aggressive or violent behavior is totally justified by feelings of injustice or treason, having previously been abused or victimized. In the same way, Saviors often forget to tend to their own needs and intensely identify themselves with "their" Victims, sometimes for having been one in the past.

Numerous coaching techniques such as asking clients to change chairs and express different internal characters, asking clients what a third person would perceive, asking clients to just state facts with a boring monotone voice, etc. can help them perceive themselves or their partners from a different position, and develop insight as to their active responsibility in a Drama Triangle.

- Playing a role in the Drama Triangle is repetitious. The same people typecast themselves into playing the same roles with similar types of partners to achieve similar relational conclusions in a form of psychological repetition compulsion. So for any one person, preferred games can be perceived as fractal relational processes.

As an indicator when a person hears a little internal voice saying "I knew it!" or "It's always the same!", or "I could see it coming!", etc. there are high odds that he or she has just participated in a known repetitious or fractal relational sequence proper to game playing as portrayed by the Drama Triangle.

Whenever clients relate occurrences or provide problems which display similar sequences, or even a similar flavor, coaches can provoke rapid awareness by asking the client to make process connections between the apparently different situations.

- Games in general and relational sequences in the Drama Triangle generally end with a confirmation of fundamental negative beliefs the actors hold about themselves, about others, and about life. Common inner voices after participating in the Drama Triangle are for example: “I will never make it !”, or “ I knew I should never trust anyone !”, or “Life is really a bummer !”, etc.

Considering coaching often consists in helping clients change their frames of reference about themselves, others, issues and problems, client games often provide coaches with indicators of limiting client world views which could be questioned.

- Invariably, playing a sequence in the Drama Triangle ends dramatically. It is a lose-lose process. There are no real winners. None of the participating actors grow or develop in the process. Some who may socially appear to come out winning with a top-dog position nonetheless pay their participation with a heavy longer-term emotional and psychological price.

After a trusting relationship has been established, clients sometimes provide their coach with apparent successes, laden with mixed feelings. Feeling ambivalence after a social or professional achievement may be an indicator of Drama Triangle presence and may justify deeper questioning on the coach's part.

- Relationships in the Drama Triangle are often intense. Much like a drug, they provide the protagonists with a relatively high and regular emotional or psychological fix. They are ego-driven processes. Consequently, all games or manipulative strategies illustrated by the Drama Triangle are interactions which help people obtain intense social and existential recognition, even if in a negative way.

This perception can provide coaches with avenues for client understanding and strategies for positive coaching on beliefs, values, ethics, etc. Games help people live by providing them with very intense relationships with preferred partners. In that light, games are similar to intimacy. It is important for coaches to perceive the very positive existential quest which motivates negative game playing.

- Games are processes that can be perceived as the dark side of intimacy, more deeply motivated by a healthy seach for existential recognition and relational intensity.

This can lead coaches to constructive questioning strategies. If some people didn’t play games, where and how would they get their minimum ration of daily recognition and existential nourishment? Simply attempting to eliminate game playing is not enough. To replace them, what other types of activities and relationships can the client develop to get positive existential and social recognition, based on measurable successes? Likewise, when a client attempts to play a game with a coach, how is that an awkward attempt to establish more intense intimacy?

- Another influential role in the Drama Triangle, or just outside of it, is sometimes forgotten: this concerns the apparently innocent bystander or the public.

Some people will engage in negative relationships as illustrated by the Drama Triangle only in the presence of onlookers or third parties, and others only in privacy, when nobody else is around. It is therefore obvious that the presence or absence of an active or passive public has sufficient clout in influencing the occurence and outcome of manipulative relationships. By their sheer presence, an onlooker influences a game, often unwittingly, and this public can be pulled in to play a more active part by assuming one of the negative roles.

This quagmire can be assimilated to the bystander’s obligation or duty to intervene, blow the whistle, or bear the co-responsibility of the outcome of a negative occurrence involving others. These reflections are close to ethical considerations concerning coaching and equivalent professions. At what point does the coach need to consider sometimes contradictory human responsibility, legal liability, confidentiality issues, client contract, and decide on the best course of action? The public role is not an easy one and solutions are not always obvious.

To give a concrete example, what if a coach has evidence that a client in using illegal drugs? To what extent is informing a coach about illegal behavior a way of making that coach a witness of that behavior? What are the coach's local legal obligations, personal ethical positions and relational strategies as a participant in a drama triangle game? The correct ethical answers to similar coach-client situations involving health, legal and financial issues, deviant behaviors, etc. are not so obvious and often lead coaches to seek supervision and other expert advice.

*DRAMA TRIANGLE AND GAME SOLUTIONS
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Some of the responses and strategies presented below can help stay out of the negative relationships illustrated by the Drama Triangle. Some may even help transform sterile discussions and relationships into more productive interpersonal dialogues. Beware however, for none of these solutions work all the time. Depending on the situation, they may permit a temporary brush away, a more permanent break in the relationship, an escalation into a more destructive game or a very positive resolution.

Depending on client negative relationship issues and the options they may think up, questions will often help them envision new angles and opportunities to either transform their situation or get out.

- Generally speaking, a large number of game-solving solution strategies consist in changing the subject, the context or offer another relational base to establish a more productive and satisfying relationship.
- A devious way to get out of a game is also to introduce an new player to take one's place or role and then diplomatically ease out of the Drama Triangle and the relationship. That is a way to pass the buck.

- When a coach feels there is an invitation to enter into the Drama Triangle, the first strategy is to be aware and mentally withdraw or physically pull oneself out of the interaction or relationship. To do that, it is useful to know what one's preferred role may be, or what buttons one has and quickly take a big step back when these are pushed or activated.
- The easiest way to avoid a gamy relationship is to avoid the relationship, especially if the person's strategies are well known, when the behavior is repetitious. As an example, if you don't want to play tennis, avoid tennis courts and tennis players.
- If in the course of a gamy verbal interaction, interactions often flow without allowing for space or silences between different people's inputs. Each person's input is interrupted before it is completed. This may indicate the protagonists are probably in a power or manipulation game. In such situations, it is useful to take a breath, take a diplomatic break, wait and think before offering a response. To insert a few seconds of silence in a heated discussion, a few weeks or months in a negative relationship may often help transform it into a more profound dialogue.
- To annul the possibility of a game, one can also choose to avoid taking on a complementary role and play the same role as the conversation partner. This is a form of behavioral mirror strategy. If for instance a discussion partner is moaning and groaning about their difficulties at work, instead of lending a friendly ear, the other partner can also moan and groan about *their* own difficulties at work. This signifies that they will not take up the complementary Savior role.
- Staying positive, informative, factual, detached and professional without offering options can also signify that one is aware of the invitation to enter the Drama Triangle and will not ssume the Savior role.
- Asking detailed clarification as to precisely what the other expects from you is another way to offer an opportunity for them to back out and refrain from offering negative relationship invitations. They may then even decide to participate in a more productive dialogue. This approach is kin to contract clarification, or establishing a precise coaching agreement so as to initiate a productive problem-solving dialogue.
- Another solution consists in qualifying the discussion partner by complimenting them on the quality and importance of their quest, of their highly motivated approach and on their great courage in their way of facing deep or important issues. Strong, direct and authentic qualification can provide partners with existential stimulation which may advantageously replace their quest for negative stimulus provided by Drama Triangle games. This validation strategy is in fact a form of counter proposal for a more productive relationship.
- Humor, when it is shared, is also an excellent strategy to transform delicate relational situations. This must be done with enough spontaneity and tact so as to avoid the perception of irony, derision, hipocrisy, mockery or sarcasm: favored Persecutor tools.
- A more violent response strategy, to be used on rare occasions, is to go full speed ahead into the game and escalate to a very high and unexpectedly powerful degree. Numerous game players want to implement Drama Triangle interactions on a socially acceptable and reasonable level of intensity. They will quickly stop their attempts when they realize that their targeted partner is ready to play on a much tougher level of intensity.
- An audience that stays out of the triangle can also help stop manipulation games. Sometimes, exiting a private setting to make a game public will stop a player who will suddenly loose interest in their negative role. Sometimes, on the contrary, getting away from a public area into a more intimate setting will suddenly boost a relationship out of the Drama Triangle.
- One obvious solution is to cleanly terminate the relationship.

Obviously implementing any one or more of these strategies will never guarantee that a game or negative relationship will magically stop or transform. Knowing these solutions is a first step. Good knowledge of oneself and practicing quick behavior reaction with an appropriate solution is another.

Coaches with a good knowledge of manipulation games, of Drama Triangle roles and of game solutions can often put right question to the client and help them solve their own game issues.

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THE K-FORMULA

The K-formula can be considered Karpmann's second conceptual contribution to the understanding of manipulation games and the least well known T.A. game concept. Its has never made it's place in everyday language nor in relationship profession circles.

The K-formula is presented as a process, much like Eric Berne's six-step G-formula rather than as roles such as in the Drama Triangle presented above. It refers to a specific negative interaction segmented into five clearly identified consecutive steps:

1) the implicit contract,
2) the perceived breach of contract,
3) the double disqualification,
4) The rupture,
5) The negative payoff.

1) Implicit Contract

The first step sets the foundation of the game. It stipulates that an unclear, implicit, vague, incomplete, misunderstood or unwritten contract is the first step or sets the stage for an unproductive relationship or communication sequence. On the contrary, to ensure good or productive personal and professional relationships, precise, detailed contracts ensure positive and productive partnerships.

To present a simple example, when a person announces that they will deliver a report as quickly as possible (ASAP), that could mean today, this week, this month or this year. Considering significant differences in frames of references and perception of time between personalities, generations, and

cultures, it is surprising to come across contracts and agreements which display such vague deadlines.

When not vague in time or "when", contracts can be unclear as to matter or "what". It is not rare to witness major misunderstandings between people who thought they understood each other as to common means and goals only to discover later a tremendous gap in what they thought was clear between them.

Consequently,

- The K-formula's first step reveals that clear contracts and agreements are important to ensure that partners avoid future misunderstandings, games and relational manipulation.
- The K-formula illustrates that establishing solid contracts should be the first step in any relational sequence, to ensure that following interactions remain positive and constructive. If it is not done first, the rest of the interaction can go wrong very rapidly.
- The first step of the K-formula also reveals that knowing how to establish good contracts is a defensive strategy, to avoid relational games as much as it is constructive, to help reach clearly defined common objectives.
- The K-formula is congruent with coaching profession's focus on the art of formally establishing positive coach-client agreements.

2) Breach of Contract

When a personal or professional contract is not sufficiently precise and written so as to be able to refer back to it in time, it is easy for any of the parties to later perceive any one of its terms have been breached. It is not so important here that the contract has in fact been violated or not. What is important is that there is a perception of violation held by either of the contracting partners. The perception does not so much rest on a reality but on a difference of perception permitted by the original contract's relative imprecision.

- In the above example, imagine that the expected file is not delivered the next day and that the party who expected the delivery feels cheated.

When either of the contracting parties perceive a breach of contract, they will inform the other, who naturally doesn't agree, considering the original lack of clarity in the wording, or lack of traces in the case of oral agreements.

3) Double Disqualification

The following interaction is characterized by a more or less aggressive questioning of each contracting partner's memory, good faith, honesty or professionalism. In essence, the other party is always considered at fault. The verbal escalation can often involve innocent bystanders and sometimes reach proportions significant enough to question the future of the relationship.

4) Rupture

Each contracting partner stomps off in opposite directions, and the interaction or relationship is severed without solving the misunderstanding.

5) Negative Payoff

The game is not over. All negative relationship processes leave traces of negative energy, confirm negative life positions, and reinforce limiting frames of references. These are considered to be the negative benefits or payoffs of manipulation games in general and of the K-formula process in particular. This negative payoff is cashed in by all concerned players. Personal, social, psychological professional and existential payoffs can be felt over days, months, and sometimes years depending on the intensity of the game.

The K-formula five-step process could be considered just another of the many G-formula games described by Eric Berne (which formally count six steps). The structural difference between the two concepts is minimal. On the other hand, the K-formula specifically underlines the attention that should be given to define contracts and agreements with precision and care to ensure partnership success. This specific focus on the need for good contracts and agreements gives the K-formula a special status and makes it useful as a preferred coaching conceptual tool.

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