

## Moving Beyond the Drama Triangle by Diane Mitchell-Miller

Most leaders, families, and organizations operate from a **Reactive mindset** by default. When we're in this mode, we see everything as a problem or a threat. Fear, blame, and the need to be right drive our decisions. This isn't a personal failing—it's human nature. Our brains are wired for survival. And while reactive leadership can be effective in the short term, it carries a heavy cost: to our well-being, to those around us, and to the organization as a whole. As complexity increases and responsibilities grow, those costs multiply.

Shifting from **Reactive** to **Creative and Regulated** leadership requires a different orientation—one rooted in **openness, curiosity, possibility, and purpose**. Instead of being pulled by fear and self-protection, we are drawn toward vision and impact. This shift means letting go of the need to be right or liked and embracing the vulnerability of true leadership. The result? People who are not only more effective but also more inspiring and fulfilled.

### The Drama Triangle: Recognizing Our Roles

Awareness is always the first step. In coaching, we often start by asking: *Where am I right now? Am I anchored in fear, blame, or avoidance? Or am I engaged, and purpose-driven?*

When operating from a **Reactive** mindset, we tend to slip into three common roles. In the 1960s, psychologist **Stephen Karpman**—who had a passion for the dramatic arts—identified these patterns and called them **The Drama Triangle**. Recognizing these roles, like a stage actor recognizing their script, is the first step toward changing the story.

#### Rescuer or Hero

The Hero wants to **fix things**—quickly. Their motivation often stems from a desire to be right or needed. They jump in to provide relief, but it's usually temporary. By solving the surface-level issue, they avoid confronting deeper, more systemic problems.

- Have you ever had someone interrupt your explanation to offer advice before you even finished talking? That's a Hero.
- Ever had a boss grab the work from you and do it themselves? Hero.
- Ever watched someone “smooth things over” without actually addressing the real conflict? Yep, Hero.

The irony? The Hero's efforts often keep the cycle going. By providing relief without resolution, they prevent true growth and accountability.

#### The Villain (or Persecutor)

The Villain operates from a place of **blame**. Their focus is on identifying who is at fault. Sometimes they turn that blame inward, attacking themselves with harsh inner criticism. Other times, they direct it outward—at a person, a department, or a vague “them” (e.g., “leadership,” “the higher-ups,” or “engineering”).

- If you've ever been caught in an “us vs. them” dynamic at work, you've encountered a Villain.
- If you've listened to someone vent about an incompetent boss or an unfair system, you've heard a Villain's perspective.

The problem? The Villain's focus on blame prevents constructive action. They stay stuck in frustration rather than moving toward solutions.

### **The Victim**

The Victim sees themselves as **powerless**—trapped by circumstances, systems, or other people's decisions. Their primary motivation is safety, but in seeking it, they reinforce their own helplessness.

- "I was set up to fail from the beginning."
- "Nobody listens to me."
- "It's impossible."
- "I wasn't given the right tools."

**Important note:** The Victim role in the Drama Triangle is about *perceived* powerlessness—not actual victimization. This is not about people who are genuinely being mistreated, manipulated, or abused. In fact, accusing someone of "playing victim" can itself be a Villain move. The Drama Triangle is a tool for **self-awareness**, not a weapon to use against others.

### **Breaking Free: The Shift to Empowerment**

Living in the Drama Triangle is exhausting, ineffective, and limiting. And yet—some estimates suggest that **90% of people spend 90% of their time** operating from this place.

The first step out? **Awareness. Know Thyself!**

Start by noticing when you've slipped into a reactive mindset. Often, there's an underlying unprocessed emotion—**resentment, anxiety, or apathy**. Once you recognize it, acknowledge it: "*I'm in the Drama Triangle.*"

Now, get present. **Presence** isn't some abstract, woo-woo concept—it's simply bringing your awareness to the here and now. Ask yourself: *What is actually happening in this moment?* Take a few deep breaths. Pause. Shift your posture. Step outside. Get curious.

Then, identify which Drama Triangle role you might be taking. Sometimes it's obvious. Other times, you might be slipping between roles. Ask yourself: *Am I seeking approval, control, or security?* These motivations often keep us stuck in the Drama Triangle.

### **The Empowerment Triangle: A New Way to Lead**

Once we step out of the Drama Triangle, each role has a corresponding **empowered** version. **David Emerald** calls this shift *\*The Empowerment Dynamic (TED)\**\*\*, though I prefer to think of it as the **Empowerment Triangle**.

#### **Victim → Creator**

Victims focus on what they *don't* want. Creators focus on what they *do* want. Instead of being at the mercy of circumstances, they take responsibility for their own experience and choices.

- Victims believe they are powerless. **Creators recognize their agency.**
- Victims resist emotions and defend their limitations. **Creators embrace emotions and expand possibilities.**
- Victims see obstacles. **Creators see choices.**

**Questions to shift from Victim to Creator:**

- Where do I have choices in how I respond?
- What outcome do I want to create?
- What is one small step I can take toward that outcome?

### **Villain → Challenger**

Villains blame. **Challengers** inspire growth. Instead of tearing down, they push others (and themselves) toward excellence.

- Villains judge. **Challengers encourage.**
- Villains punish. **Challengers hold accountable.**
- Villains criticize from frustration. **Challengers challenge from a place of belief in potential.**

### **Questions to shift from Villain to Challenger:**

- How can I frame my feedback as an opportunity rather than a criticism?
- What strengths do I see in this person/situation that I can amplify?
- How can I challenge myself to lead with curiosity rather than blame?

### **Hero → Coach**

Heroes rescue. **Coaches empower.** Instead of swooping in with quick fixes, they support others in finding their own solutions.

- Heroes take over. **Coaches guide.**
- Heroes seek validation. **Coaches seek growth.**
- Heroes solve for others. **Coaches develop problem-solvers.**

### **Questions to shift from Hero to Coach:**

- What questions can I ask to help this person think through the problem?
- How can I support rather than save?
- What does this person *already* have within them that can solve this challenge?

## **Fred Kofman and Victim to Player**

While the Drama Triangle reveals the patterns we unconsciously fall into—Victim, Persecutor, or Rescuer—Fred Kofman takes this insight a step further. He challenges us to move from unconscious reactivity to conscious responsibility by shifting from **Victim to Player**.

Kofman contrasts two mindsets we can adopt in challenging situations: the **Victim** and the **Player**.

- The **Victim** believes life is happening *to* them. They feel powerless, blame others or circumstances, and avoid responsibility.
- The **Player** believes life is happening *through* them. They take ownership of their actions and responses, even when outcomes are beyond their control.

Kofman emphasizes that being a *Player* doesn't mean you're at fault for everything—it means you reclaim your power by asking,

### **“What part can I play in improving this?”**

This shift is foundational for conscious leadership, emotional intelligence, and personal growth.

Watch the 12-minute video, [Be a Player not a Victim](#) – (escalator scene at minute 4:45)

## The Drama Triangle: Prizes and Punishments

We don't stay in these roles because we love drama—we stay because they offer a payoff. Each role in the Drama Triangle gives us something we think we need: attention, control, approval, protection. These are the “prizes.” But those prizes come with hidden costs—emotional tolls and relational damage that keep us stuck. These are the “punishments.”

Recognizing both can help us shift more consciously and compassionately out of drama and into empowerment.

Role	Perceived Prize (What You Get)	Hidden Punishment (What It Costs You)
Victim	Sympathy, attention, rescue, validation, reduced responsibility	Powerlessness, dependency, stagnation, loss of agency
Rescuer	Purpose, approval, control, feeling needed	Burnout, resentment, enabling others' helplessness
Persecutor	Power, righteousness, control, emotional distance	Isolation, fear-based respect, guilt, damaged relationships

## Additional Resources

[Conscious Leadership and an Introduction to the Drama Triangle.](#)

# Empowerment Triangle

