

A COACHING GUIDE

The Drama Triangle

Moving Beyond Reactive Patterns

Awareness · Responsibility · Empowerment

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*“You either walk inside your story and own it,
or you stand outside your story and hustle for your worthiness.”*

— Brené Brown



Most leaders, families, and organizations operate from a reactive mindset by default. In this mode, we experience life as a series of problems to solve or threats to manage. Fear, blame, urgency, and the need to be right quietly drive our decisions. This isn't a personal failing — it's human. Our brains are wired for survival.

Reactive leadership can be effective in the short term. It helps us move fast, protect what matters, and regain a sense of control. But over time, it comes at a cost — to our well-being, to our relationships, and to the cultures we're part of.

Moving beyond reactivity requires a different orientation — one rooted in awareness, regulation, and choice. Instead of being pulled by fear and self-protection, we begin to orient toward curiosity, possibility, and purpose. The result isn't just greater effectiveness — it's greater integrity, influence, and fulfillment.

The Drama Triangle: Recognizing Our Roles

When we're operating from a reactive state, we tend to fall into a set of familiar relational patterns — often without realizing it.

In the 1960s, psychologist Stephen Karpman identified these patterns and called them The Drama Triangle. With a background in both psychology and the dramatic arts, Karpman noticed that under stress, people often relate to one another as if they're following a script.

The Drama Triangle describes three roles people unconsciously rotate through when they're stuck in unproductive dynamics. These roles aren't identities or character flaws. They are stress responses — protective strategies we learned because, at some point, they worked.

Recognizing these roles — like an actor recognizing the script they've been handed — is the first step toward changing the story.

Rescuer or Hero — “Let me fix this for you.”

The Rescuer — often experienced as the Hero — steps in to save, solve, fix, or soothe, frequently without being asked.

At first glance, this role looks generous and caring. And often, it is. Rescuers are typically highly capable, empathetic, and responsive. But beneath the helpfulness is a quieter driver: a need to be needed, to be right, or to relieve their own discomfort in the face of someone else's struggle.

By jumping in quickly, the Rescuer brings immediate relief — but that relief is usually temporary. Surface problems get solved while deeper, more systemic issues remain untouched.

Common Rescuer language sounds like:

"Just let me handle it."

"You shouldn't have to deal with this."

"I'll take care of it."

While the Rescuer feels helpful in the moment, this role carries a quiet price. For the other person, it can reinforce a sense of helplessness — sending the unspoken message: You can't handle this without me. This often leads to resentment, exhaustion, and burnout.

Rescuing is hard to release because it provides quick relief, a sense of worth, and the illusion of control — while asking us to tolerate discomfort and trust others' capacity when we step back.

Villain — “This is your fault.”

The Villain criticizes, controls, or blames. 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.”

- 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 — “This is happening to me.”

The Victim experiences themselves as powerless, trapped by circumstances, systems, or other people's decisions. Life feels like it's happening to them rather than something they can influence. At the core of the Victim role is a deep desire for safety. But in trying to protect themselves from further disappointment or harm, the Victim unintentionally reinforces their own sense of helplessness.

"I was set up to fail from the beginning."

"Nobody listens to me."

"It's impossible."

"Why does this always happen to me?"

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. Accusing someone of “playing victim” can itself be a Villain move.

Breaking Free: The Shift to Empowerment

Living inside the Drama Triangle is exhausting, ineffective, and limiting. It thrives under stress, pressure, and nervous system dysregulation — when we’re tired, threatened, overwhelmed, or emotionally flooded.

Some estimates suggest that up to 90% of people spend 90% of their time operating from this reactive state. And it’s not static. People often rotate roles, each one reinforcing the system:

- Victims can become Villains: “I’ve put up with enough.”
- Rescuers often turn into Villains when they feel unappreciated.
- Villains may flip into Victims when challenged or confronted.

No role exists in isolation — each one reinforces the others and keeps the drama alive.

The First Step Out: Awareness

Name it to tame it.

Change doesn’t begin with fixing — it begins with noticing. Start by paying attention to when you’ve slipped into a reactive mindset. Often, there’s an unprocessed emotion underneath — resentment, anxiety, fear, or apathy. When you notice it, simply acknowledge it. This naming alone creates space.

Come Back to the Present

Presence isn’t abstract. It’s simply returning to what’s happening right now instead of replaying the past or rehearsing the future.

- Take a few slow breaths
- Pause before responding
- Step outside or move your body
- Get curious rather than certain

Then ask: What is actually happening in this moment?

Identify the Role You’re Playing — there is power in naming things

Next, notice which role you’re stepping into. A helpful clue is to look at your primary motivation:

- Am I seeking approval? (Rescuer / Hero)
- Am I seeking control? (Villain)
- Am I seeking security or safety? (Victim)

The Empowerment Triangle: A New Way to Lead

Once we step out of the Drama Triangle — the “to me” mindset of Victim, Villain, and Hero — each role transforms into an empowered counterpart through a “through me” orientation. Victim → Creator | Villain → Challenger | Hero → Coach

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 and solutions.
- Victims see obstacles. Creators see choices and opportunities.

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 and stay curious.
- 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 or 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 unconscious patterns, Fred Kofman extends the work by focusing on mindset. He invites us to move from unconscious reactivity to conscious responsibility by shifting from Victim (to me) to Player (through me).

- The Victim feels powerless, blames others or circumstances, and avoids responsibility.
- The Player takes 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 and agency by asking: “What part can I play in improving this?”

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

The Drama Triangle: Prizes and Punishments

We don't stay in these roles because we enjoy drama — we stay because they give us something. Sometimes that “something” is obvious: attention, control, approval, protection.

For some people, drama offers familiarity. When intensity shaped early environments, calm can feel foreign, unsafe, or even empty. Drama brings movement, energy, and a sense of being alive. These are still prizes — even when they cost us later.

But every prize has a hidden punishment. Over time, the same strategies that create short-term relief lead to exhaustion, fractured relationships, and diminished agency. Seeing both sides clearly is what creates the possibility for change.

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 / Hero	Purpose, approval, control, feeling needed and wanted	Burnout, resentment, enabling others' helplessness
Persecutor / Villain	Power, righteousness, control, emotional distance	Isolation, fear-based respect, guilt, damaged relationships

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

Empowerment Triangle

