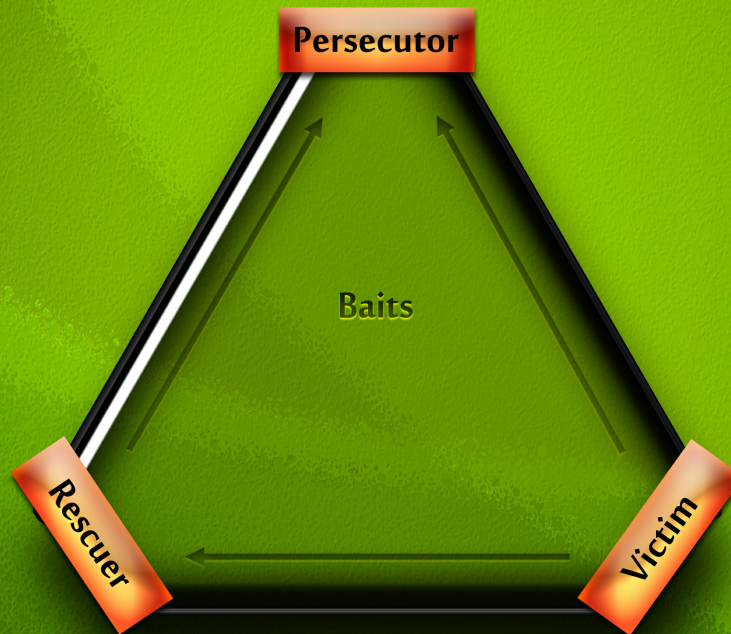




Sixty Second Insight #6: The Drama Triangle

by Dave Arch

The Drama Triangle



Given to us by Dr. Karpman, the Drama Triangle promises to diagram **any dysfunctional relationship**. Every dysfunctional relationship has a Persecutor, a Victim and a Rescuer. That doesn't mean it takes three people to have a dysfunctional relationship. I find I can have one all by myself. I'll explain that a little later.

But let's take an extreme example. An alcoholic husband comes home and starts throwing things, waking up the family. Obviously, in that situation, he's The Persecutor; the family is The Victim.

He wakes up in the morning hung over and says to his wife, "Honey, would you mind calling work. I'm just not feeling well enough to go in today." And she does. She's now become The Rescuer. Notice how the arrows in the poster have people moving and changing places.

He does this over several days and finally she gets mad. She's back to feeling like The Victim. "I know how I'll get him," she says. "I'll tell him I'm going to call into work, but then I won't. That'll show him." Now she's The Persecutor and he's The Victim. You get the picture.

People just keep changing places and never move outside the triangle. If you were to draw a picture of yourself on this poster, my hope is it would be way up in the left hand corner or down in the lower right hand corner *way outside* of this triangle. That's where you want to be. That's where you want to stay.

As I said, I find I can do this all by myself. My wife on a weekend said, "You know what I'd like to do?" I said, "What?" And she said, "I'd like to strip wallpaper in the family room." Well, that wasn't my idea of a good time, and she saw that on my face. She said to me, "You don't need to help me. It's just something I want to do."

I made the mistake of walking past the family room and seeing her in there, and I said, "Oh, I'll get my bucket and sponge. I'll help her." And I brought that bucket and helped her. I started on one wall (the opposite wall where she was). And I began to think, "How did she get me in here?" "Oh, it just makes me so mad. It's not how I want to spend my weekend at all."

So, instead of stripping large strips of wallpaper off the wall like she was, I was taking little tiny strips. She could sense something was wrong. She said, "Is something wrong?" And I said, "No, everything's fine." And she asked again, "Is something wrong?" And I said even more defiantly, "No, everything's fine."

And that's when I understood she really meant it. I did not need to be in there to help her. I was over in the corner, running all of these bases on the Drama Triangle by myself. I had come in through the Rescuer door, and I now felt like a Victim as I was taking little strips off the wall as the Persecutor. She didn't care if I was in there.

Now, some people do want you to come into the Drama Triangle, and they will place bait into the Drama Triangle to get you to come in. Sometimes, it's just by acting pathetic saying something like, "You're my last hope." "You're my only hope. If you don't help me, nobody will."

Then you'll put on your cape. You'll fly in through The Rescuer door, and you'll be in the triangle. Very soon, you're going to start to feel abused. You're going to become The Victim. And then you're going to wonder how to get out or get back at them as a Persecutor. You came in based on a bait.

If you look at the *Sixty Second Insight #7: The Ten Most Common Communication Dysfunctions*, you will find what I believed to be the ten most common baits that people use to get people to enter The Drama Triangle. Sometimes, they'll have you come in as a Persecutor, or sometimes as a Victim, or sometimes as a Rescuer; but you have to come in through one of those doors.

One of the best insights I've ever had shared with me is that in order to avoid The Drama Triangle, we have to understand the difference between *rescuing* someone and *helping* someone. For instance, my friend says, "I'm moving on Saturday. Can you help me move?" And I say "What time are you starting?" And he says, "Eight o'clock." I said, "I'll be there" and I show up at eight.

He has the truck. He has the dollies. He has other people to help. At eight o'clock, we start loading the trucks. At noon, we aren't done, but he brings in pizza. One o'clock, two o'clock, and we're still not done. This house has a lot of furniture in it. By five, I'm furious. He has now taken my whole day, and I'm mad. I'm feeling like a victim. I was seeking to rescue him.

Let's rewind. Suppose when he called, I had said, "You're starting at eight? I'm sorry, I can't be there until ten. Should I even bother coming?" He says, "Sure, come on." "And I have to leave at two," I tell him. "That's fine," he responds.

I show up at ten. I'm there for the pizza. I'll leave at two, and I'm not mad. *Helping* always has boundaries associated with it. *Rescuing* seldom does. So, I get caught in the Drama Triangle when I come in as a Rescuer with no boundaries. The Drama Triangle is something a leader tries to avoid at all cost. It gets you nowhere.

However, please understand that there are some people with whom you'll have no relationship unless you're willing to be in the Drama Triangle. They do not know how to have a relationship outside of the Drama Triangle. It would be best not to have a relationship with those folks considering the price you pay when you enter The Triangle.
