WORKSHEET · LEADERSHIP & PERFORMANCE

The Drama Triangle at Work

The Rescuer, Persecutor and Victim roles, and how managers step out of them

In 1968 the psychiatrist Stephen Karpman described three roles people fall into when working relationships get strained: the Rescuer, the Persecutor and the Victim. He called it the drama triangle. Teams move around it every day without noticing.

Managers are especially prone to the Rescuer role. Stepping in, covering and fixing feel like good management, and in the moment they often are. Over time they keep people dependent, leave the manager carrying everything, and stop the team building its own capability.

IF SOMEONE NEEDS HELP NOW

If there is an immediate risk to life, call **999**. Samaritans are available free, 24 hours a day, on **116 123**. In England, NHS 111 (option 2) connects to an urgent mental health service.

01

The three roles at work

ROLE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE AT WORK	HOW IT CAN SOUND
Rescuer	Redoing work, absorbing problems, always being the one who sorts it	"Leave it with me." "It's quicker if I do it."
Persecutor	Blame, criticism, micromanaging, keeping score	"Why is this wrong again?" "I can't trust anyone with this."
Victim	Helplessness, feeling hard done by, waiting for rescue	"There's nothing I can do." "Nobody tells me anything."

The roles feed each other. A Rescuer needs someone to rescue, which keeps that person in the Victim role. When the Rescuer runs out of capacity, they often tip into frustration (Persecutor) or feeling overwhelmed and unsupported (Victim).

02

Where does your team get stuck?

How often does this happen in your team?

0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = often, 3 = most of the time

	0	1	2	3
I redo or rescue work rather than coach someone through it	☐	☐	☐	☐
Problems come to me before people have tried to solve them	☐	☐	☐	☐
I end up frustrated with the people I have helped	☐	☐	☐	☐
When something slips, the first response is blame	☐	☐	☐	☐
Some team members seem to wait for others to sort things out	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel I am carrying more than my share	☐	☐	☐	☐

03

Stepping out

In 1990 Acey Choy described the winner's triangle: an alternative to each role that solves problems rather than keeping them going.

INSTEAD OF	TRY	FOR EXAMPLE
Rescuer	Caring: coach people to solve it themselves	"What have you considered? What would help you take the next step?"
Persecutor	Assertive: be clear about what needs to change, without blame	"This needs to be different next time. Let's agree how."
Victim	Vulnerable: name the difficulty and ask for help	"I'm at capacity on this. Can we look at priorities?"

EXERCISE

For managers

1. The relationship in my team that most often goes round the triangle:

2. The role I usually take in it, and what it costs:

3. What I will do differently next time: