



From Drama Triangle to Influencing Cycle - Changing the Relationship between Safety Professionals, Supervisors and Employees

I remember chatting with a safety professional who recounted that, when they first started in safety with a manufacturing company, he asked his manager how she would know he was doing a good job? The response was: "When I see you at breaks sitting by yourself because no one wants to be seen with you". The inference was "enforce the rules". Many safety professionals I have spoken with express frustration at being seen as the policer of rules by both supervisors and employees when they know they can add significant value to the business from their observations about culture, supervision and how work is performed. "We are only trying to do the right thing" "It's a thankless task", "We want to keep people safe" are examples of comments I often read and hear. I get the feeling that many Safety Professionals, at times, feel like victims - "I was trying to help".

My understanding is that many people pursue safety as a career because they genuinely want to make a difference by helping people be safe at work. This means they often take on the role of personally being at site ensuring people are behaving safely and following the rules rather than developing supervisors and employees generally to take on this responsibility. They then feel let down when others don't comply, push boundaries, behave unsafely - "I try my best but they don't comply - we need more rules".

There is another way. By understanding the psychological dependency and payoff that we get from playing roles at work we can stop feeling like victims and stop rescuing and persecuting others. Instead, we can influence others through developing, coaching and learning. Karpman's Drama Triangle helps us to understand the negative roles some people play at work (and at home) and the Influencing Cycle provides a positive and supportive approach to achieve productive and safe outcomes.

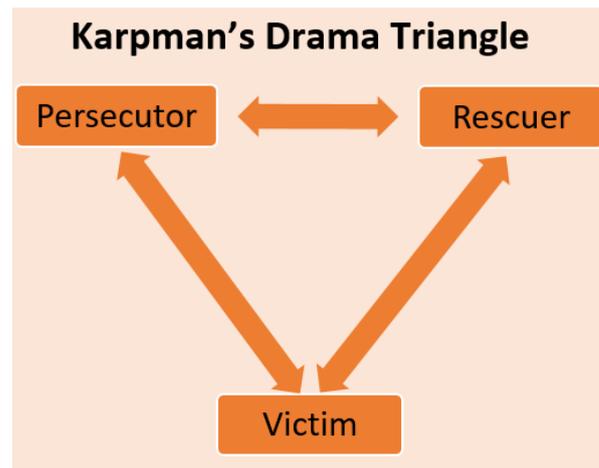
Karpman's Drama Triangle

Karpman's Drama Triangle provides an explanation of relationship dependencies, their dysfunctional impact on people and the need to break the drama cycle. Karpman observed that some people play specific roles in relationships to fulfil their personal psychological needs. Karpman identified three roles people play - Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim and referred to the role interactions as a Drama Triangle – see model on the following page.

1. **Persecutors.** Persecutors criticise and blame others who become victims. They can be blaming, controlling, policing, rigid thinking and take the stance that it is “all your fault”. They are like critical parents - always criticising. Their payoff is that they never take personal responsibility as it is always somebody else’s fault.

2. **Victims.** Victims feel they are not appreciated and are being treated badly. When things go wrong, or they can’t do something it’s always someone or something else’s fault. They never take personal responsibility to change their situation. Their key question is “Can you help me?” and their usual stance is “Poor me.” Their payoff is that they never have to take personal responsibility to change their situation as somebody always helps them out.

3. **Rescuers.** Rescuers come to the aid of Victims – they fix things for others at the expense of their personal wellbeing. In response to the victim’s “Can you help me?”, the rescuers response is an enthusiastic “Yes I can”. They enable the victim’s behaviour by building the victim's dependency on them. Rescuers feel good about their role as they like to “help people”. Internally, however, they often feel angry or frustrated about the situation or how others treat the victim. They are often martyrs as they focus on helping everybody else but themselves. Their stance is “I’ll help you”.



In organisations, the result of people playing drama triangle roles is poor performance from dysfunctional teams and individuals.

You see this triangle played out at work where someone (persecutor), continually criticises another person (victim) who then complains to another person (rescuer) who says they will talk with the perpetrator in behalf of the victim. As all involved are receiving a psychological reward for their behaviour, no one takes responsibility for changing the situation. The drama continues to play out over and over again until the victim goes on stress leave for bullying or, in most cases, leaves, goes to another job and, guess what, the drama plays out in the new job as well.

From a safety perspective, the drama triangle looks like the situation below. In this case, the Safety Advisor (Persecutor) feels they need to enforce some rule. The personnel (Victims) complain to the Supervisor (Rescuer) who then talks with the Safety Advisor about the complaint.

- Safety Advisor (Persecutor). Attends a site meeting and severely criticises personnel for the poor quality of their Job Safety Analysis.
- Personnel involved (Victims). Complain to the Supervisor about being unfairly treated by the Safety Advisor.
- Supervisor - (Rescuer). To the personnel – don’t worry about it, I’ll talk with Safety Advisor about it.

People don’t always stay in their role, often changing within the same situation. For example, in the above example, the Safety Advisor may feel like the Victim after the Supervisor’s intervention,

viewing the Supervisor as a Persecutor and responding as a Victim with “I was only doing my job”, or “I was only stopping someone from getting hurt”. Consider the example below and note the changing roles.

- Supervisor (Victim). Supervisor says to the Safety Advisor “I’ve just been to the site and observed the crew doing their JSA. It was terrible. Somebody is going to get hurt! I want you to go their meeting in the morning and fix it.
- Safety Advisor (Rescuer): “Isn’t it terrible. How many times have I gone through this with them. Ok I’ll go and sort it out for you.”
- Safety Advisor - (Persecutor). Goes to the meeting and instructs the crew on how to do and effective JSA. Threatens them with disciplinary action if they don’t get it right.
- Personnel (Victims). Feel unfairly treated by the Safety Advisor so they complain to the Supervisor.
- Supervisor becomes the Rescuer. Says to the crew "Don't worry I'll take care of it". Supervisor talks to the Safety Advisor and says that she thinks the crew are doing an ok job, that there isn’t much of problem with risk assessments and they didn’t need to be “chewed out”.
- Safety Advisor now feels like the Victim. Safety Advisor is thinking “I was only trying to help you out. Nobody appreciates what I do.”

If no one takes responsibility to do something differently, the next time there is an issue, the same scenario will be played out. For the outcomes to be different, someone in the triangle must take responsibility to behave differently and influence the outcome.

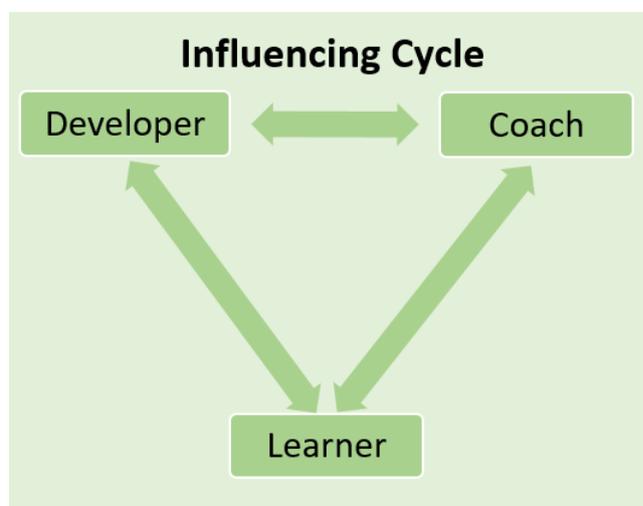
Note that the triangle can involve just two people, with people changing roles during an exchange.

As Safety Professionals, we need to be aware of the games we can get caught in and be confident in changing the nature of the relationships so that issues are resolved and learning occurs. The Influencing Cycle provides direction on how to do this.

Influencing Cycle

Once you recognise that a drama triangle is at play, you can change your behaviour to influence the outcomes.

1. **Be a Developer** Instead of the persecutor. Talk with the people involved to understand what the issues are and then work with them to resolve issues. Build confidence through skills development and provide the support required for others to become competent. Provide clear Adult to Adult (not Critical Parent) direction. Hold people accountable for achieving outcomes.
2. **Be a Coach** - Stop being a rescuer



Talk with the person about the issue to understand what their concern is. Be a listener. Provide coaching and assistance in developing confidence and skills of others in dealing with the situation. Instead of saying “I’ll take care of it for you” Say “I’ll come with you in the morning to support you”, or “I’ll come with you and explain the parts you are unsure of then next time you can do it.” It will help you get out of the mire and into more strategic issues.

3. **Be a Learner** instead of a victim.

Stop blaming others and feeling like the world is against you. Put your learner’s hat on and seek to understand why you feel the way you do and what you need to do differently. Talk with others to help understand why you feel the way you do and to find alternative solutions. Use questions and statements to help you understand the issues - “I’d like to find another way of” “Help me to understand why you see it this way.” “Let’s discuss the issue”, Use “I” statements to express your feelings.

By taking a different perspective, you can’t help but influence relationships with other people. We stop the arguing, the game playing, the blaming. We get off the merry-go-round and move to genuine problem solving that will help us achieve the results we want – safe and productive workplaces. We still achieve the desire that drives many Safety Professionals which is to make our work environments safer for all - just from a different approach.

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