



Spotting and avoiding conflict: How Transactional Analysis can help you

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Our latest webinar took place on 21 April with Quynh Anh TRINH XUAN, Executive Coach, MCC from *Explore and Grow* leading a discussion on why leaders, more than ever before, need to learn to dissect conflict to try and help prevent the escalation of an unwanted situation.

This is a brief summary of the key points discussed.

Everyone will face conflict at work at some time. It could be tension with a colleague, or power play between senior people. As individuals and team and organisation leaders, we can all play a role in spotting potential conflict and avoiding it, or resolving conflict once it has started.

Conflict is on a spectrum, from small tensions to major crises. All issues of conflict are important, though, and what starts small can become a major issue. The drivers of conflict are many-fold, and include:

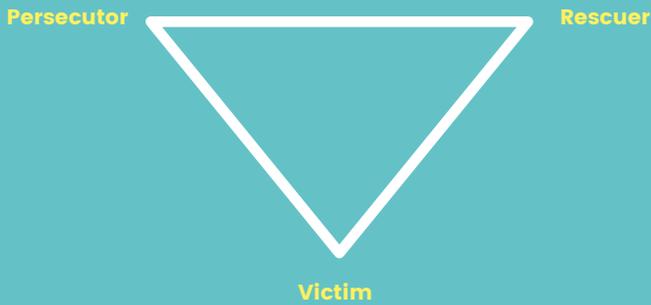
Culture, mood, pressure, hierarchy, gender, power games, personal stories, different knowledge levels and personality.

“Transactional analysis takes us from self-awareness to self-control.”

Transactional Analysis: The Karpman Drama Triangle

Transactional analysis looks at social interactions and the role of individuals to understand behaviour. A tool of transactional analysis, known as the Karpman Drama Triangle, can be used to see how people's reactions to conflict influence outcomes. The triangle can be used in a situation where at least two people enter the conflict and take one or more roles.

Karpman Drama Triangle



“Conflict can trigger old emotions of being belittled, provoking a defensive reaction.”

Persecutors can attack and criticise from a position of actual or perceived superiority. Victims complain, but without asking for support. They may be defeatist. Victims can blame others, and by doing this they escape responsibility.

The rescuer or saviour enters the triangle with good intentions of helping the victim or trying to resolve the situation. However, by not asking if help is needed, the rescuer can end up taking over, resulting in the victim either rejecting their help or becoming disengaged. These roles are often taken unconsciously, and can switch during the conflict. Some people can have a ‘preferred’ role.

Looking at an example is a good way to understand how tension builds, and how it can be avoided or resolved.

Practical Example:

The Context

- A high-tech company is preparing to go through a transformation
- A meeting is organised by the Transformation Team to discuss how to scale it
- The Transformation Team has been working on this project for the past 2 years
- The CFO is relatively new to both the sector and the company and is invited to the meeting to be kept in the loop
- The Senior VP, who is the same level as the CFO and has been with the company for 10 years) is leading the transformation project

The Conversation

- CFO: “Before even scaling a business idea like this, can we discuss whether it has any value?”
- Senior VP: (deep sigh) “It is a good question, but we are not here today to discuss this.”



This conversation could trigger a lot of tension in just a few words, and if it was allowed to build, it could create potentially long-term issues between the two teams.

If I was...

“If I was the SVP...

- “I would feel offended and attacked by the CFO’s comment”
- “I would want to respond ‘here we go again’ “I would see it as a power play”
- “I would feel that someone new was questioning my work”

“If I was the CFO...

- “I would feel humiliated”
- “I would think I wasn’t being taken seriously”
- “I would think I was being excluded”

The best way to avoid conflict is not to step into the drama triangle in the first place. Both the CFO and the SVP could have chosen their approach or reaction in a way to avoid moving into the triangle.

CFO

- *Wording the question differently*
- *Asking the question before or after the meeting*
- *Being aware how the question appears coming from someone who is new*
- *Thinking about how a team that has been working on a project for two years would react to the question*
- *Being prepared for the meeting*
 - *Knowing the backstory and context*
 - *Understanding their role in specific meetings*
- *Being challenging but treating others with respect*
- *Remembering that they are coming from different company and a different field of work, so respecting others' expertise*

SVP

- *Briefing the CFO before the meeting about the project, and about their role in the meeting (just as an observer)*
- *Taking time to acknowledge the question and respond:*
 - *"Good question"*
 - *"Let's take this offline"*
 - *"Let's use this meeting to give you the background and keep you in the loop, and then we can talk later"*
 - *"We can't resolve it in this meeting. Let's schedule another meeting to discuss it further"*
 - *"I've been immersed in this project – it would be good to understand what you see as a fresh pair of eyes"*
- *Giving three reasons why the project is as it is*
 - *If that doesn't work, take it offline, then if that in turn doesn't work, escalate to the CEO*
- *Making things less personal and less emotional*
- *Understanding that challenging an accepted way of doing things can be valuable*
- *Expecting that a new CFO would ask this type of question*
- *Accepting that the CFO will bring useful perspectives to the project*

Both being self-aware and looking at the bigger picture

A better briefing from the CEO could have provided better context, avoiding the tension in the meeting and smoothing the transition. This could include how the company took the decision to begin the transformation, what the business case was for the transformation, and why the transformation might be important above and beyond financial imperatives, for example improving workplace morale, providing opportunities for future growth, or creating better working conditions for employees.

There is the possibility that the CFO was brought in to assess and shake up the transformation process, in which case the CEO may have briefed the CFO to ask the question. In this case, it would have been better handled in a three-way discussion between the CEO, CFO and SVP.

Reactions may be different in a one-to-one context compared with a group, where an individual may feel threatened by a majority, or a senior person may not want to lose face in front of junior colleagues. How people react in a meeting can also reflect their cultural background or the cultural context, for example losing face in front of others in China can be disastrous, but straight talking may be more acceptable in the US. Group dynamics can have an impact as well.

"It is important to understand the situation of the person that you are talking to"

The role of a meeting chair or facilitator can be very important in meetings that have potential for conflict. For example, in the case of the SVP and CFO, a facilitator could have called a time out to discuss the situation before the meeting resumed.

Being aware of transactional analysis and the Karpman Drama Triangle can help people get out of conflict situations, and avoid getting into them in the first place, in both the workplace and in personal life.

"When you are really deep in a project, it's hard to see what someone new might see. Taking a fresh look could be a good opportunity"