

TITLE: Creating a Drama Free Work Practice

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It is OK to admit that we enjoy a little drama – on TV that is. There is a plethora of options – reality shows, soap operas, game shows, and even the news gives us short bursts of drama. Where we do not enjoy drama is in our daily lives – both home and work. Workplace drama not only makes a person dislike their job, it also causes a loss in productivity; and may even result in fear-anxiety-stress symptoms in ourselves as well as jeopardize the safety and wellbeing of our patients. Who needs workplace drama!?

Even though many of us will say we hate drama and we want to avoid drama, the truth is, we have trouble dealing with drama the correct way. Why? Because drama means conflict and many of us do not like conflict. Wouldn't it be nice if we could make conflict a desirable trait of a high-performance team? What if we could turn the tables on drama/conflict and make it productive for team performance and business success!

Labeling Drama

One of the problems with workplace drama is that it has so many labels. What label fits the person? Is the situation labeled? Is the label being used the correct label? Think about these commonly used labels to describe drama in the office:

- Drama Queen/King – overreacting to minor incidents
- Queen Bee – uses power to bend the rules to get their way, plays office politics
- Whiner – overreacting to perceived obstacles, whine and complain, never takes responsibility
- Cynic – an expert in the failures of decisions, sees only the downside of every situation
- Gossiper – a form of passive-aggressive behavior
- Slacker¹ – lingering in the break room, surfing the net, chatting, avoid working by looking busy
- Space Cadet¹ – off-the-wall comments, appear to be not paying attention
- Power Grabbers¹ – value titles and recognition, act like they are managers
- Challenger¹ – oppositional, resents authority, relish debates, adamantly hold to their positions

Do any of your co-workers come to mind as you read the list of labels? It is easy enough to label various co-workers as gossipers, space cadet, or drama queen in an effort to gain an understanding of the person. However, the crux of the problem may actually be the labeling process. Labeling the person as a whiner may be a step in the right direction for dealing with this person, but often, it ends with the labeling and the person or situation are simply chalked up to “whiner” and the root cause is never resolved – thus allowing the drama to continue, only now it has a label.

For example, the Queen Bee label is affixed to a manager. Every time the team schedule is handed out, someone on the team makes a comment about it being “par for the course” or “so-so always gets their way because they are the Queen Bee.” In this case, the label is given but the drama continues. Labels do not solve the drama – instead, they are a type of defense mechanism that fuels more workplace drama².

Understanding the Drama Triangle

Workplace drama is a dysfunction in work relationships. To overcome the obstacles, it is necessary to have a deeper understanding of drama relationships to develop confident communication to resolve the real issues at hand. There are two helpful theories: The Karpman Drama Triangle³ and The Empowerment Dynamic⁴.

Karpman Drama Triangle has just 3 players in any given drama – Victim, Rescuer, and Persecutor. The 3 different roles interact with each other as represented by the following diagram⁷:



Victim (not an actual victim per se)⁵ – Feels like a victim, “Poor Me” mentality. Does not take responsibility for feelings and actually sets the stage for a drama triangle to form. Traits of a victim⁸:

- Needs to involve others in situation/conflict
- Feels powerless, helpless, or hopeless
- Sees themselves as unable to handle situations

Rescuer – Person (or activity) that helps relieve the victim of their victimhood, “Let me help you”, sets out to help but usually offers only short-term repairs that keep the victim dependent upon the rescuer. Traits of a rescuer⁶:

- Can’t say no
- Constant need to fix other people’s problems
- The need to be the hero
- Control freak

Persecutor – Person who dominates and maintains a one-up position over the victim, can also be a condition or circumstance. Traits of a persecutor⁶:

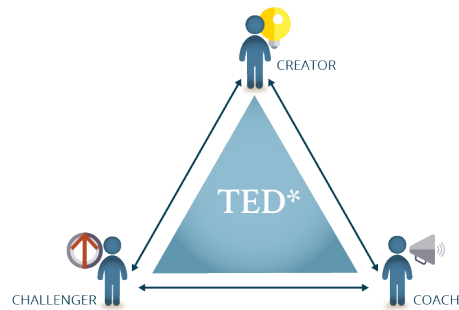
- Need to win every argument, defensive
- Blaming
- Sarcasm
- Harsh criticism
- Justifying behavior

Common participants in a drama triangle are⁹: father/mother/child, colleague/you/manager, client/pet’s illness/doctor. What is also important to understand about this type of triangulation is that a person is not always operating from the same position. For example, Jane (Victim) has a problem with Ted (Persecutor) so she goes to Pam (Rescuer). Pam talks to Ted who did not even realize there was a problem. Ted becomes frustrated and turns to his Rescuer, Bill, to go talk to Pam....and the triangulation continues. How to break the cycle? Have Jane (Victim) talk directly to Ted (Persecutor)...or consider changing the triangle.

Turn the Triangle Over

Instead of viewing the Drama Triangle in such negative positions, turn the triangle into a more positive relationship. The Victim is now the Creator, Persecutor is now the Challenger, and the Rescuer is now the Coach⁴.

TED* (*The Empowerment Dynamic)TM



Traits of the Creator:

- Asks, “What do I want?”
- Thoughtful evaluation of the situation
- Chooses appropriate steps toward an outcome rather than focusing on the problem

Traits of the Challenger:

- Asks, “What is my intention?”
- Provokes others to take action such as learn something new or make a decision
- Provides an opportunity to choose a response or take action

Traits of the Coach:

- Asks, “How do I see others?”
- Helps to develop a vision and action plan
- Provides encouragement and support

Notice the difference? No more “poor me” victim, instead, an empowered person taking responsibility for what he/she wants. No more rescuing, instead, coaching, supporting, and encouraging. No more negative persecutor, instead, an opportunity or challenge.

Putting the Triangle to Work for Drama-Free

Kathy has been labeled as a whiner. As soon as Claire posts the schedule, Kathy starts whining about it. She then goes to Dr. Bob to whine about it. Dr. Bob goes to Claire to request “fixes”. Claire adds to the drama by deliberately giving Kathy certain shifts she knows will irritate Kathy. The drama cycle continues – Victim (Kathy), Persecutor (Claire), and Rescuer (Dr. Bob).

Time for a change. Kathy needs to think like a creator, Dr. Bob takes on the role of coach, and Claire is the challenger. How does this change look? For starters, Dr. Bob can coach through this drama by guiding both Kathy and Claire to identify what they want to achieve, skills or resources they need, what is working/not working for them, and steps to take. Kathy needs encouragement to evaluate what she really wants (what is the real reason for complaining about the schedule), and then chose appropriate steps to achieve a better outcome than complaining all the time. Claire needs to admit to her intentions – is she being passive-aggressive with Kathy or is there the intention to get Kathy to evaluate the situation and make a firm decision.

As you can see, it is never easy to deal with drama. The process is made even more difficult when we label an individual and fail to identify other players in the drams. Look at drama occurring in your practice – is there more than just 1 person involved? Perhaps you can begin to see at least 3 people involved in the drama triangle – and once you identify the players you have unlocked the door to ending the drama.

References and Resources

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