

# The Kinship of Victimhood

## the problem with problem-focused conversations

By David Emerald

Have you ever stepped back and reflected on the tone and quality of the conversations you find yourself engaging in with coworkers, friends or family members? As I watch and listen to people interacting (I have long been an avid “people watcher”) it is amazing how much time and effort goes into talking about what’s wrong with this or what we don’t like about that. It is all-too-easy for us to reinforce and collude with each other in such “isn’t it awful” discussions. I have come to call this phenomenon the “Kinship of Victimhood.”

Here’s one example. I was on a commuter jet flight into Chicago’s O’Hare airport. The flight was so short that the single flight attendant did not leave his seat during the flight. I was sitting in the second row. In the first row was a pilot from another airline and a flight attendant from yet another, both of whom were “catching a ride.” The two flight attendants and pilot entered into a 20-minute conversation that moved from one story of complaint to another, as they “compared notes” on their opinions and stories of gate agents and air traffic controllers and the state of the industry.

As they talked I was listening with an ear of compassion, as I can only imagine the stress and strain of being an employee in the airline industry these days.

Their conversation certainly served as a great example of the Kinship of Victimhood. One definition of kinship is “relationship through common characteristics or a common origin.” While they all worked for different airlines, they shared a common industry under tremendous pressure and could relate to one another’s examples of victimization.

They engaged in one of the more common “rituals” of this kinship, which is the practice “one upping.” It often takes the form of something like, “you think that’s bad, listen to this one” and the person tells a story that is even more striking than the one before.

Let’s face it; we have all participated in such conversations. They abound. Pick a subject: the weather; politics; the economy; global climate change; world affairs. The list is endless.

This kinship does serve a purpose. It is a way of connecting; a way of relating; and many times a way of coping. We see the positive side of the Kinship of Victimhood when we read or hear about neighbors coming together in times of disaster or threat.

The “shadow” of this kinship is that it often reinforces Victimhood – as a role and way of being – by heightening the focus on the victimization we experience. Caught in the cycle of what Dr. Steven Karpman named the drama triangle, with its roles of victim, persecutor and rescuer, these ways of reacting only perpetuate a problem-focused orientation.

*The Power of TED\* (\*The Empowerment Dynamic)* offers an escape from the drama triangle with antidote roles of creator, challenger and coach. A creator, supported by challengers and coaches, focuses on outcomes, rather than the problem-based victim orientation.

As a creator, we are called to move our conversations beyond the Kinship of Victimhood. We do so by focusing our attention on what we want to create, rather than what we want to avoid, and on how we choose to respond, rather than react, to the situations. As co-creators, our conversations have the potential for the same level of affinity and kinship, however our opportunity here is to speak with intention for what we really want and base our relationships on our shared desired outcomes and contributions.