

## The 3 Drama Roles: Their Core Beliefs and Delusions

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This paper is written to describe the qualities and characteristics of the three roles that comprise the Drama Triangle. First described by Dr. Stephen Karpman in the late 1960's, the Drama Triangle roles and their interplay vividly describe the most common strategies human beings use to manage their fear and anxiety. Renamed the Dreaded Drama Triangle (DDT)<sup>™</sup> in David Emerald's book, *The Power of TED\** (*\*The Empowerment Dynamic*), the DDT aptly describes the toxic nature of these roles. Each of the roles have their roots in the Problem/Victim Orientation and focus on what they don't want or don't like.

These drama roles are made-up strategies that the ego creates to manage its anxiety about what it doesn't like or want. Many aspects of the roles are useful and help human beings learn to cope and survive. If these drama roles are the only strategy to get through life, however, the roles over time become outdated and limiting. They are not necessarily "bad" --- they simply limit our effectiveness and prevent more creative ways to work with life's challenges. By recognizing these patterns when they arise, we can observe them in action and choose a more empowering way to think, relate and take action that is embedded in the TED\* roles.

### The Victim's Resignation

When you find yourself in the **Victim role**, the strategy is to "move away" from the conflict and/or "freeze" in the face of the situation or person you perceive as a **Persecutor**. When in the drama, you believe you don't have the power or ability to do things for yourself. You become resigned to the idea that life happens "to you," so you avoid taking responsibility for your choices or actions.

It can be difficult to admit to yourself that you might play a Victim role. Americans especially are loath to admit to Victim thinking because of the culture's "rugged individualism" and the Country's founding beliefs on individual rights, freedom and personal responsibility.

Victim thinking can be very subtle and operate in the background of your mind. The ego doesn't like to face the fact that, as a human being, it will eventually die. Because of this

existential threat, depending on your upbringing and messages you received as a child, you may have been taught that life is basically unfair.

**An important note:** There are absolutely Victims in the world of poverty, war, natural disasters and much more. We are not speaking of victimization, which is very real. We are writing about and challenging Victimhood, which is a mantle of self-identity, feeling powerless or hopeless to choose your response to people or situations.

We have identified three beliefs that contribute to the Victim's resignation.

### **Resignation #1: I am deficient.**

This first resignation describes the core belief of someone who develops a “deficiency story,” usually taking root early in life. This is the story you tell yourself when feeling small, weak or inferior. The deficiency story might sound like: “I am not enough.” “I am not lovable.” “Life is unfair.” “I don’t know how to.....(fill in the blank.)” As this story takes hold, it eventually permeates your strongly held beliefs about yourself. This also means you must figure out how to get the help that you need to survive. And, if totally honest, this can lead to manipulating others to take care of you when you give up responsibility for your own life.

### **Resignation #2: Since I am deficient, I will always need outside help to “fix me.”**

With your deficiency story running in the background, when in the Victim role you learn to figure out how to get others to do things for you. This can either be to fix or take care of you and/or to protect you from the Persecutor in the drama. You may have been told that, in life, there are winners and losers and you see yourself on the losing end of life—either in general or in a particular situation. Guilt is often used by Victims to seduce Rescuers into helping them. A manager may say to their boss, “You have so much more experience in this area, please tell me what to do.”

### **Resignation #3: Why should I try? Life and events are against me and I am small in the face of this “truth.”**

A sense of unworthiness can grow so strong that sitting on the sidelines and complaining may become more prevalent. (It is important to note that any time you are complaining, you are in the Victim role!) Alternatively, you may adopt a sense of entitlement as a survival tactic to cover up the hopeless feelings. The entitlement can be quite annoying as other people notice the lack of personal responsibility and expecting others to take care of you.

**Shifting** out of the Victim role requires that you shift your belief about yourself. Knowing that your true essence is as a **Creator**, you begin to take responsibility for your thinking and actions. One way to do this is to take time to reflect upon your values and what you really care about. Learn to ask: “What do I want in this moment?” and “What is mine, and only mine, to do?”

All three of the DDT roles are strategies that the ego creates to manage its anxiety about what it doesn't like or want. The seduction of these roles is that some aspects of the roles were useful and helped you cope and survive life's challenges, especially early in life.

The DDT roles are not necessarily “bad”— they simply limit your effectiveness and prevent more creative ways to work with life's challenges. By recognizing these patterns when they arise, you can observe them in action and choose a more empowering way to think, relate and take action that is embedded in the **TED\*** (\***The Empowerment Dynamic**)™ roles.

## The Persecutor's Obsessions

The origin of the three DDT roles is rooted in early childhood. As infants and toddlers looking up to powerful adults, the child develops survival instincts to secure food, sleep, warmth, safety and love. The environment in which they grow can sometimes be scary and unstable.

While the **Rescuer's** strategy is to become pleasing and accommodating or “move toward” others to be loved, the Persecutor's strategy is to “move against” others by being aggressive and controlling to create an illusion of safety. When in **the Persecuting role**, a person often has an underlying fear of becoming a Victim. Therefore, they adopt the idea that it is better to dominate, than to be dominated. We have identified three obsessions when a person takes on the Persecuting role.

### **Obsession #1: My world is dangerous, so I need to be vigilant.**

This first obsession affirms the Persecutor's core belief that the world is unsafe and they will get hurt if they don't aggressively stay on the lookout for danger. It is likely that sometime in their life they experienced chaos or insecurity and adopted a "survival of the fittest" mentality. Ever vigilant, they often wear down other people with their persistent need to control. Persecutors believe that their controlling strategies will minimize the threats and uncertainty they feel.

### **Obsession #2: I must control and be on top.**

The need to win and convince others that they are right evolves from their vigilant need to control, win or stay on top, sometimes at all costs. Their world view is divided between winners and losers, right and wrong, and they determine what and who is right and wrong. Persecutors shudder at the thought that they may be perceived as weak. In the work world, a Persecuting manager uses any number of ways to stay in control and "one up." It can be the micromanager, "drill sergeant," the critic, the manipulator and even the office clown who uses toxic humor to put others down.

### **Obsession #3: I will think rather than feel.**

Persecutors deny their vulnerability, otherwise they would not be in control. Feelings, they assume, could render them weak and disempowered, so they rely on their thinking to keep them strong. Persecutors secretly fear their suppressed anger, so they think (and often manipulate) their way out of situations rather than admit to mistakes or imperfections. Because their heart-centered emotions are suppressed, they can be viewed as unfeeling and without compassion for others. Ironically, Rescuers become Persecutors if their "helpfulness" becomes controlling and dictatorial. "Well I am just trying to help" can easily cross into "Do it my way, because I know best."

The Persecutor's primary need is to manage their fear of uncertainty. They do this by using control and keeping others "one down," hoping to mitigate their feeling that the world is a dangerous place.

When the Persecutor learns to be more comfortable, even curious, about things they don't understand, they loosen their grip on their craving to be in control. Rather than be fooled by

the illusion that they can control anything, the present moment becomes an adventure, rather than something that needs to be controlled. This “shift” isn’t easy for a life-long Persecutor.

These questions can support a Persecutor who stops, pauses and asks themselves:

- “What has this situation or problem come into my life to teach me and/others?”
- “How can I support others growth and development, rather than control, put down and dominate them?”
- “What is my intention—to put down and blame or, to build-up and support others?”

These questions can help the person who has fallen into the Persecuting role learn to be more present to the moment and what they truly desire for themselves and others. The questions also open them to **shifting** from being a Persecutor to embodying **the Challenger role in TED\*** (\*The Empowerment Dynamic)™.

Always being on guard to defend themselves robs Persecutors of joy and happiness. All of us want to be loved, appreciated and to experience joyful moments—even when we act like Persecutors!

## The Rescuer’s Delusion

The Rescuer role is the “pain reliever” in the Drama Triangle and focuses on those who need help (or so the Rescuer interprets). Denying that they have any needs themselves, a Rescuer’s internal dialogue may be: “I would rather be helpful to others and fix the world’s problems than focus on my own needs.”

While this may appear to be a laudable desire, there are at least three central delusions that explain the Rescuer’s obsessive focus on others.

### **Delusion #1: A Rescuer’s longing is that by helping others they will someday get their own needs met.**

Rescuers are proud to be a helper and fixer of other people’s problems. They love – even crave – the praise they get for their ongoing acts of kindness. Inwardly the Rescuer loves being

a hero and feels this is the only way they will feel worthwhile as a human being. By focusing on others, they deny their own needs and refuse to take responsibility for self-care or set appropriate personal boundaries. Their ultimate fear is they will end up alone. This fear fuels their delusion that they will eventually feel love and appreciation from the Victims they spend so much time and energy helping.

**Delusion #2: Rescuers believe that person in the Victim role will ultimately learn to take responsibility for their own needs.**

The Rescuer sees the Victim as unable to take care of themselves, which justifies their intervention. Their intervening methods can unknowingly create a cycle of disempowerment for the person in the Victim role. Why should the Victim take responsibility if the Rescuer is going to do it for them? The more the Rescuer takes responsibility, the less responsibility is taken by the Victim that they are trying to help. Many managers fall into this delusion and can breed dependence in their employees for the manager to have “the answer.”

**Delusion #3: Rescuers fail to recognize how they become a magnet for more Victims.**

Rescuers attract needy people. If the Victim says to a Rescuer: “I really need your help because no one else can fix this like you can” — it can be music to a Rescuer’s ears. A Rescuer is unconscious to how often they scan their environment looking for people who need their help. This explains why there are often Victims in the Rescuer’s world who are irresponsible, addicted or in trouble. The delusion is that Rescuers do not recognize how their need to be needed feeds the dynamic.

Rescuers are helpful people and are often perceived as excellent co-workers and family members. Their willingness to participate and be useful means they are often first to volunteer to “help out.”

The key is for Rescuers to learn to be helpful and supportive without insisting that the Victim be a certain way. Otherwise, the Rescuer’s attachments reinforce the three delusions.

When you relate to others through TED\* (**\*The Empowerment Dynamic**)™ you see everyone as a **Creator**— as being ultimately resourceful, capable and whole. People may need your

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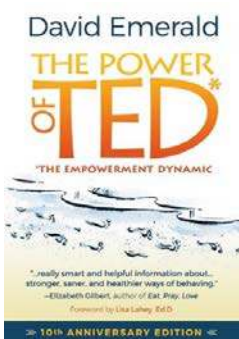
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momentary support as a fellow co-Creator. While lending a helping hand, you can do so based upon what **they** tell you they need, not what you decide for them.

As a co-Creator, you value the right of others to choose their response to life's challenges. You know that sometimes people stumble along the road of learning and growth. Slowing down and learning to pause, knowing the world will go on even if you are not rescuing it, can be very difficult for a Rescuer. This new belief alters the very nature of the Rescuer's self-identity.

If you observe yourself in the Rescuing role, check to see if one or more of the three delusions are operating in your life. If so, take note and allow yourself the compassion to understand the nature of the Rescuer role that takes root, from time to time, in all of us.

Learn to see others as genuinely resourceful with their own unique gifts. Ask them what they might need from you, and then be ready to assist them in their time of temporary need—as the co-Creators you both are.



**David Emerald** is the author of *The Power of TED\**, an executive coach, and uplifting keynote speaker who lives in the Pacific Northwest with his wife and business partner, Donna Zajonc. David has over thirty years of experience of leadership development that has led to developing his simple, yet profound, TED\* framework. **Donna Zajonc MCC**, Director of Coaching and Practitioner Services for the Power of TED\*. Donna has over fifteen years of experience as a leadership coach, keynote speaker, facilitator and trainer. She is passionate about building individual and collective capacity to help shift from reactive conversations to more creative and empowering dialogue.