

# Conflict *without* Casualties

*A field guide for leading with*  
**COMPASSIONATE  
ACCOUNTABILITY**

*"Conflict without Casualties* fills a gap by showing  
leaders at any level how to leverage positive conflict.

*Practical, insightful, challenging, relevant."*

—DAN PINK, author of *To Sell Is Human* and *Drive*

**NATE REGIER, Ph.D.**

# **CONFLICT** *without* **CASUALTIES**

A Field Guide for Leading with  
Compassionate Accountability

**NATE REGIER, PhD**



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.  
*a BK Business book*

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*To my parents, who planted and watered the  
seeds of compassionate accountability.*

# *Contents*

**Acknowledgments** *ix*

**Introduction** *1*

**PART 1 | CONFLICT WITH CASUALTIES:**

**DRAMA IS KILLING US** *7*

**Chapter 1 | Conflict:  
The Big Bang of Communication** *9*

**Chapter 2 | Drama:  
Misusing the Energy of Conflict** *13*

**Chapter 3 | But I'm Just Trying to Help!  
Good Intentions, Unintended Consequences** *33*

**PART 2 | A FRAMEWORK FOR POSITIVE CONFLICT:**

**COMPASSIONATE ACCOUNTABILITY CAN CHANGE THE WORLD** *45*

**Chapter 4 | Compassion:  
Not for the Faint of Heart** *47*

**Chapter 5 | Compassion and the Cycles of Human Civilization:  
Will We Get It Right This Time?** *75*

**PART 3 | CONFLICT WITHOUT CASUALTIES USER MANUAL:  
PUTTING NEXT ELEMENT'S COMPASSION CYCLE TO WORK 87**

**Chapter 6 | Violators Will Be Prosecuted:  
Three Rules of the Compassion Cycle 89**

**Chapter 7 | Warning! Drama Approaching!  
Three Leading Indicators 103**

**Chapter 8 | It's All about Choices:  
Three Choices to Move 111**

**Chapter 9 | Coaching Accountability When There's No Drama:  
Match and Move 129**

**Chapter 10 | The Formula for Compassionate Conflict:  
Confronting Drama with Compassionate Accountability 147**

**Chapter 11 | Conflict without Casualties:  
Preparing to Struggle with 163**

**Appendix A | Personal Development Guide 181**

**Appendix B | Preparing for Conflict: Building My ORPO Bank 191**

**Notes 195**

**Glossary of Terms and Phrases 197**

**Index 201**

# *Acknowledgments*

Jon Gordon is a really nice guy! I first heard him speak at the World Leaders Conference in 2015. He is an 11-time *New York Times* best-selling author, leadership coach, and motivational speaker. His message of positive energy and servant leadership resonated with me so I began following his work.

The more I worked on this book, the more I became convinced that it needed legs. It needed the best chance possible to succeed. So I reached out to Jon on the remote chance that he'd give me a few minutes to bounce around ideas, brainstorm title concepts, and lend me some of his tremendous positive energy. If you've ever taken the risk of asking for what you want, you will understand how I felt. Within a few hours I got a message back from Ann Carlson, Jon's delightful "VP of Details." By the way, that's the coolest title I've seen in a long time! Ann referred me to Jon's podcast on book publishing and offered to set up a call with him after I'd listened to the recording. I was thrilled!

I listened to Jon's podcast and it was just what I needed; inspirational, informative, and actionable. It helped me discern this one very important thing: This is the book I was meant to write, the book I want my kids to read because it is who I am and what I stand for. I passionately want to share this message and these tools with the world.

Jon took my call and it was terrific. He was supportive, affirming, helpful, and open. At the time of my call with Jon, I still didn't have a title for the book, and was anxious about it. Jon brainstormed with me and reassured me to be patient. "Don't try too hard," he said. "If you have faith it will come." And it did. Thank you Jon, for your inspiration and help. You may never know how

big an impact a phone call or text can make in a person's life. It made a huge difference for me. Thank you.

Every day I am grateful for my wonderful team at Next Element. It truly is an amazing laboratory for developing, testing, and living what we teach. Every day I am challenged to live into a better version of myself. Every day I am touched by the genuine love my teammates have for each other. Every day I am amazed by their passion for making a difference in people's lives. Thank you for inspiring me, pushing me, and giving me permission to write this book!

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Innovation and discovery don't happen in a vacuum. The concepts in this book have been evolving for nearly a decade within multiple relationships worldwide. Without our clients, who have generously given their time and resources to experiment with our methods for compassionate accountability, we would have no idea whether they work. Likewise, our network of certified trainers have provided invaluable feedback and dialogue to help refine our theory and methodology.

Nowhere are the casualties of negative conflict more personal than with family. And nowhere does the power of compassionate accountability make a more profound impact. I am amazed by the daily, positive impact the concepts in this book have in my personal life. I am delighted for a family that supports me in doing what I love. My deepest gratitude goes to my unbelievable wife, Julie, and our three daughters, Asha, Emily and Lauren. Thank you for being patient with me when I stumble, for graciously letting me tell stories about you when I'm at work, and most of all, for believing in me. When life gets crazy and work seems to become too important, I remind myself of this quote from Jon Gordon, "I don't want to be a big household name. I want to be a big name in my household."



# *Introduction*

It was January 2012 and I was sitting on a plane with my wife, Julie, heading to Costa Rica to celebrate our 20th wedding anniversary. Little did I know that the book I was reading on the plane would help crystalize a model that my team and I at Next Element had been working on for nearly a decade. That day the seeds for this book were planted. *Conflict Without Casualties* is the manual for our guiding mission: to transform negative drama into compassionate accountability. For readers who are curious about the book that triggered my inspiration, and the process of discovering and developing the Cycle of Compassion, Chapter 5 is just for you.

I grew up the son of missionary parents in Africa. I've been asked a thousand times if I will become a missionary and if I ever want to return to Africa to follow in their footsteps. I haven't felt that calling, yet I have always believed I could be a missionary wherever I am. Guiding a company that teaches and coaches leaders to use positive conflict to create is a humbling and rewarding mission. I am grateful for this opportunity to fulfill my calling. This book is my journey and my message.

During the final stages of writing this book I struggled with how to really make this project something special. Having already written and self-published my first book, I'd already conquered my biggest fear—that nobody would care about what I wrote. A lot of people liked it. I've been blogging regularly for several years now, and that's helped me work on some other key issues: getting over worrying about other people's approval, finding my voice, and deciding what message I want to share with the world. The process of writing this book started more as a task to be accomplished, since we wanted a comprehensive

reference book to support our Leading Out of Drama® training system. But the more I wrote, the more excited I became.

I believe that the misuse of conflict energy is the biggest crisis facing our world and that we haven't even begun to harness the creative potential of conflict. When people embrace the fullest meaning of compassion as a process of "struggling with" others in creative conflict, they can transform lives, companies, and the world.

In our first book, *Beyond Drama: Transcending Energy Vampires*, co-authored with my good friend and Next Element founding partner, Jeff King, we covered the key concept of Drama and Compassion at a fairly basic level. I'm so grateful for the many lives impacted by *Beyond Drama*. From Australia to Romania to Canada, our first book has helped expose the dynamics and nuances of drama and reframe the conversation around how to deal with it. *Conflict Without Casualties* represents a significant evolution of our team's thinking and practice around positive conflict.

I wrote this book because my company and I are on a mission: a mission to help people shift the balance of negative energy in the world by using conflict to create. For a decade we have successfully taught change agents such as top executives, parents, managers, teachers, and clergy to engage in conflict in a new way. We have developed a model and suite of tools to transform the energy of conflict into a creative force. These tools allow people to stop fearing conflict and start leaning into conflict for positive results.

I've always had a problem with the notion of conflict reduction, management, or mediation. All of these concepts imply that conflict is something to be lessened or eradicated, as if it's fundamentally a bad thing. I'm not surprised that many people would view conflict this way. The casualties of conflict are everywhere you look: divisive political rhetoric, religious polarization, and global ideological warfare abounds. Everywhere you look, conflict is generating casualties. Why wouldn't people want to avoid or control it?

I've seen the casualties firsthand. In high school, I lived in Botswana during the reign of apartheid in South Africa. I've witnessed police raids, murders of innocent political refugees, and car bombs that left a million pieces of flesh, metal, and clothing impaled on the thorns of an acacia tree. As a licensed clinical psychologist I've worked with victims of domestic violence who fear for their own lives and the lives of their children. I've mediated conflicts between divorcing parents and feuding executives who want nothing more than to destroy the other person's life and spirit. I've coached pastors who were pushed

out of their congregations by corrupt bishops who abused their authority. I've been framed and fired from a job. I'm no stranger to destructive conflict.

Through it all, I've had the good fortune to have parents, mentors, and friends who believed there had to be a better way. They didn't reject conflict; they just knew there was a better way to use it. I listened and learned from them. I understood that eliminating the casualties of conflict cannot happen by repressing the conflict and just "being nice." It happens by stewarding the energy inherent in conflict to make something positive, even amazing. At Next Element, we've developed a method for doing this. It's called Compassionate Accountability.

You *can* engage in conflict without casualties. We have spent a decade teaching, coaching, and advising thousands of people on how to do this—refining and improving our methods over time. From Fortune 500 executives to pastors of the smallest rural churches, the concepts in this book have made a profound difference in how people walk bravely into the battlefield of conflict while preserving the dignity of all involved. If you believe that conflict can have a positive purpose, then learning how to use it well can significantly change your personal and professional relationships and the cultures in which you work.

Transformative communication involves the ability to engage in positive conflict, with compassion, to achieve results that benefit the greatest number of people. *Conflict Without Casualties* is a detailed, actionable, down-to-earth manual for how to practice compassionate accountability. If you are a change agent looking for powerful tools to leverage conflict to catalyze change, this book is for you. If you are a mediator looking for tools to break an impasse, this book is for you. If you are a manager who avoids conflict because you want to keep the peace, this book is for you. If you are a parent who has high standards for your children and can't seem to bring up the subject without alienating them, this book is for you. If you are a CEO who wants a higher level of accountability from your people while preserving their dignity, this book is for you. If you are tired of the negative drain of drama and want a set of tools for leading yourself and others out of drama, this book is for you.

Negative conflict, manifested as workplace drama, costs the U.S. economy more than \$350 billion per year in the currency of broken relationships, dysfunctional teams, morale and engagement problems, and failure to thrive. Part one of this book, "Conflict With Casualties: Drama Is Killing Us," invites readers into an incisive exploration of the dynamics, motives, behaviors, costs and consequences of negative conflict through the lens of Karpman's Drama

Triangle. A day in the life of persons working at Drama Corp exposes the answers to questions like: What are the insidious ways drama manifests in the workplace? What are the basic principles of gossip? What do drama-based cultures look like? What happens when people try to help when under the influence of drama? Why do people keep acting this way when it hurts themselves and others?

A vast majority of leaders mistakenly assume conflict is the problem. They try to minimize the casualties by either avoiding conflict or controlling, mediating, or managing it. While this may reduce their stress, it also compromises the positive, creative potential in conflict. There's a better way. The second part of this book teaches readers about Next Element's proprietary model, the Compassion Cycle, a researched and tested framework for resisting the negative pull of drama, making healthier choices and using positive conflict to lead others down a better path. The Next Element team has trained thousands of leaders in these concepts and the positive results are profound. Readers will meet Juanita, the head of marketing at Compassion Corp, a leader who shows us how to apply compassionate accountability in her workplace relationships. Readers will be guided through step-by-step applications, and see multiple examples and case studies to show how the concepts can work in their lives.

The more powerful the tool, the more important the stewardship of that tool. Part three is the user's manual, the nitty-gritty rules and formulas for effectively putting compassionate accountability to work every day. This is where readers really gain confidence and understanding for how to take the concepts off the page and into their most important relationships.

*Conflict Without Casualties* is packed with user-friendly principles, personal stories, real-life examples and case studies, provocative questions for discussion, and easy-to-follow strategies to begin building your compassionate accountability skill set. The book is designed to be used in a variety of personal and professional growth settings. Are you working through the book on your own or with a coach? We've developed specific personal reflection and development questions at the end of the book. Would you like to use it as a book study or centerpiece of a team-development program? A companion discussion guide for just that purpose can be purchased separately. A glossary will help readers keep track of new concepts and definitions.

Any great learning quest involves a solid assessment of your current state. We've developed the *Drama Resilience Assessment (DRA™)*, an online assessment to gain insight into your drama tendencies and compassion potentials. Go to

next-element.com/conflict-without-casualties to complete one free assessment and receive your results. Use these results to add context and value to your book study, team-building efforts, or coaching program. If you complete the DRA™ for individual purposes, you will only be allowed to rate yourself and receive a basic profile report. If you complete the DRA™ as part of a professional training or coaching program, you may have the opportunity to rate your team or another individual and receive a more comprehensive profile report. Do you want to measure change in your compassionate accountability? Take the DRA™ again and compare your results.

Some readers may wish for specific applications of compassionate accountability to topics like meetings, strategic planning, leading change, or supervisor-employee performance conversations. I can assure you that this book has plenty of tips you can apply in any of these situations. You won't see a chapter with any of these titles, because I've chosen to keep this book focused on the theory and methods of compassionate accountability: the essential toolkit. The principles are applicable in so many settings that it would be difficult to narrow it down to just a few.

Do you want to take your skills to the next level and become a part of our worldwide professional network? Leading Out of Drama (LOD®) is our system for comprehensive training, skill-building, and coaching for compassionate accountability. Visit our website or call Next Element to find out more about professional certification programs or to find a certified LOD® professional near you.

Enough introduction. Let's begin.

PART 1

# CONFLICT WITH CASUALTIES

Drama Is Killing Us



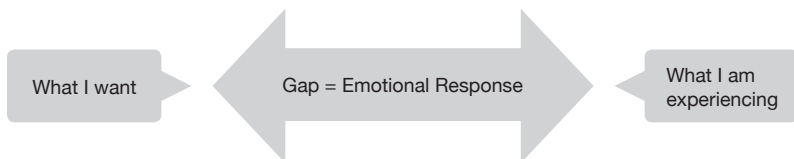
# *Conflict*

THE BIG BANG OF COMMUNICATION

*“A problem only exists if there is a difference between what is actually happening and what you desire to be happening.”*

—Ken Blanchard

At the most basic level, conflict is a gap between what we want and what we are experiencing at any given moment. Conflict is everywhere. I want my latte in my hands before 7:50 a.m. so I can get to work on time, and the line is long at Starbucks. I want my team to come together around our strategic vision, and they have lot of questions. I want to feel rested tomorrow, and I also want to stay up tonight to watch three episodes of my favorite show on Netflix. I want to be recognized for my hard work on a project, and my client criticizes it. I want to feel settled about a decision, and my gut clenches whenever I think of it. I want to feel confident that my sales team will positively represent our brand in front of customers, and they question each other’s integrity. I want to feel safe in my house, and I am afraid because two families in my neighborhood have been victims of recent break-ins.



What happens when conflict occurs? Where do you feel it? Does your heart rate soar? What about your stomach? Does it churn or tighten up? Perhaps your hands get cold and clammy or your neck gets hot. Does your hair stand up on the back of your neck? Maybe you notice racing thoughts or extreme emotions. Some people shut down. Some people lash out. Some people have learned to take it in stride. But for most of us, conflict is stressful. The more conflict we experience, the bigger the emotional, physical, and psychological toll it takes on us.

### **CONFLICT GENERATES ENERGY**

Before evaluating whether conflict is good or bad, or how we should respond to it, it's important to recognize that conflict generates energy. That energy shows up in a variety of ways. It could show up in racing thoughts and fantasies about what to do next. It could show up in increased heartbeat and flushed face caused by increased cortisol levels in the bloodstream. It could show up as an overwhelming desire to fight back or run away.

Conflict generates energy, pure and simple. And conflict is unavoidable. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that conflict is part of the grand design of the universe. I'm convinced that conflict is a necessary part of our human experience. Humans are created to be different from each other. Because of this we will inevitably have different needs, wants, and pursuits. When these come into contact with each other, conflict occurs.

Conflict is energy. Conflict is unavoidable. The only real question is: what will you do with the energy created by conflict? How *will* you spend it?

### **WHEN CONFLICT COMES KNOCKING, HOW DO YOU STRUGGLE?**

Our experience working in thousands of interpersonal conflict situations shows that when conflict occurs, human beings struggle. We spend the energy struggling. That struggle seems to take one of two forms: we either struggle against or we struggle with.

Struggling *against* is a process of opposition and destruction. It's about taking sides, forming camps, viewing the struggle as a win-lose proposition, and adopting an adversarial attitude toward resolving the discrepancy between what we want and what we're getting. Struggling against is everywhere. It's in politics and religion. On the news. On social media. Look no further than a typical Facebook post to see self-righteous, moralistic, opinionated, and dogmatic attitudes that create and maintain polarized "us vs. them" struggles.



Struggling *with* is a process of mutuality and creation. It's about seeing the solution as a two-way street, viewing the struggle as an opportunity for a win-win outcome, and adopting an attitude of shared responsibility for resolving the discrepancy between what we want and what we are experiencing.

***“The purpose of conflict is to create.”***

—Michael Meade

A friend of mine, the poet, psychologist, mythologist, and musician Michael Meade, says “the purpose of conflict is to create.” Wow, that’s a strong statement! I agree. If conflict is inevitable and it generates energy, and if creating something new requires energy, then all the pieces are in place. The determining factor is whether the energy of conflict will be used productively to create, or destructively to tear down. That choice is up to us. Each one of us has the power to transform the energy of conflict into a creative force.

This notion of conflict is quite different from what I was taught in school, and even what I see in most leadership literature. Conventional wisdom says that conflict is supposed to be managed, reduced, or controlled. Why? Because most people are accustomed to struggling *against* during conflict. When we ask people what’s the first thing that comes to mind when they think of conflict, they nearly always use phrases like, “very stressful,” “people get hurt,” “nothing good comes out of it,” “I avoid it if I can,” or “I gotta win.” We rarely hear an enthusiastic endorsement of conflict as a creative force. We also rarely meet a leader who has mastered the art of positive, generative conflict.

## **DRAMA AND COMPASSION**

Two critical concepts in this book, and in our entire philosophy of transformative communication, are Drama and Compassion. You will see these themes repeated, expanded and applied throughout this book and our work at Next Element.

Drama is the result of mismanaging the energy of conflict. It diverts energy towards the pursuit of self-justification, one of the strongest human urges and one that almost always gets us into trouble.

The word compassion originates from the Latin root meaning “co-suffering.” Com means “with” or “together” or “alongside.” Passion means suffering or struggling. Together, these reveal a process of struggling with others.

Compassion is the result of people taking ownership of their feelings, thoughts and behaviors, and choosing to spend the energy of conflict pursuing effective solutions that preserve the dignity of all involved. Compassion is more than care and concern for others. It's about the willingness to get in the trenches and struggle together as an equal with others.

The greatest change agents in history, those who have made the biggest positive difference, have practiced this kind of compassion. From Gandhi to Mandella, Mother Theresa to Martin Luther King, each has struggled *with* instead of *against*. The next chapter unpacks the dynamics, behaviors, and consequences of drama, which is what happens when people struggle against themselves and each other.

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Appendix A is a Personal Development Guide, that is geared specifically for those who would like to go deeper with the concepts from each chapter. Use this guide in your personal development, with your coach or counselor, or with a trusted friend or mentor. The guide is organized by chapter number and title so you can easily find the applicable items.

# *Drama*

## MISUSING THE ENERGY OF CONFLICT

Everyone loves stage drama that entertains and excites. Unexpected plot twists, heroes and heroines, bad guys and good guys. Alternatively, there's interpersonal drama that hollows out your stomach, makes you want to scream, and sucks the life out of you. Easy to sense and difficult to get a handle on, interpersonal drama is one of the most costly drains on relationships and productivity.

### **A DAY IN THE LIFE OF DRAMA CORP**

Welcome to Drama Corp. It was Wednesday morning and the operations team assembled for its obligatory staff meeting. Fred, the Chief of Operations, was frustrated and critical of Sally's performance, saying things like, "You obviously don't care enough about your work." Sally looked down and said nothing, even though she had nothing to do with what had happened. Others in the room went silent and kept their heads down. Jim whispered to Sally that after the meeting he'd help her learn how to get on Fred's good side. For the rest of the meeting, everyone nodded in apparent agreement with whatever Fred said, and kept their own ideas to themselves.

After the meeting the drama continued and deepened. Brett found Sally in the break room and reassured her that it wasn't her fault. "Fred is just a jerk who has no idea what he's talking about," he scoffed. Jim stopped by Sally's desk and reminded her that he was on Fred's good side and had some advice for her. Meanwhile, Fred popped into Greta's office asking if she had noticed Sally's poor work as well. For the rest of the day, everyone from that meeting was preoccupied with what had happened, and the circle of drama grew. Lunch

and break room interactions were tense. Side conversations and private text messages filled the office.

Fred spent more than an hour reviewing the employee conduct manual to see if he could write Sally up for insubordination. He just knew she was up to something bad. He wrote an email to HR asking for guidelines on documenting behavior. Sally felt angry all day, and was short-tempered with her teammates. Throughout the day she texted with several friends, including a few who didn't even work at Drama Corp, about what a jerk Fred was and how she couldn't wait to get out of there. One friend offered to check for openings at his company. Jim withdrew to his office and began plotting how to get more attention for his own projects in the next meeting.

### **WHAT IS DRAMA?**

It's easy to identify the behaviors of drama: gossip, secrets, triangulating, retaliating, blaming, avoiding, turf wars, blowing up...the list goes on. A working definition that helps us get a handle on the concept is a bit more difficult. Here's what we've come up with:

Drama is what happens when people struggle against themselves or each other, with or without awareness, to feel justified about their negative behavior.

**Drama is about struggling against.** There's always a winner and a loser. The fight may be internal, between people, or involving companies and nations. Relationships in drama are usually adversarial.

**Drama happens with or without awareness.** How each person behaves in drama is predictable and habitual. It's highly predicted by personality and amazingly consistent from day to day. Because we tend to learn these behaviors in childhood, we've likely been practicing them our whole lives.

**Feeling justified is the modus operandi in drama.** If I'm in drama, my ultimate motivation is to be able to say, "See, I was right!" How much time do you spend in your head, or with your allies, rationalizing the negative things you do? Think back to a time when you made a poor decision or treated someone badly but didn't want to take responsibility for your behavior. What did you do instead? I bet you spent a lot of energy trying to justify it. It's the only way

we can sleep at night! This is why drama has such a negative impact on productivity: people are spending enormous amounts of energy trying to feel justified.

**Drama is all about negative attention behavior.** Humans need attention. Period. If we don't get it in positive ways, we'll get it negatively. It's the next best thing, and far better than being ignored. In my first book, *Beyond Drama: Transcending Energy Vampires*,<sup>1</sup> I outlined the six types of positive attention and their negative attention counterparts.

**Drama is fueled by myths.** Dr. Taibi Kahler discovered four false beliefs that fuel distress, drama, and miscommunication.<sup>2</sup> He called these false beliefs Myths because they are very believable and drive our behavior, yet are literally false. The myths are:

You can make me feel good emotionally.

You can make me feel bad emotionally.

I can make you feel good emotionally.

I can make you feel bad emotionally.

We are often reminded by the therapists among us that, "Nobody can make you feel a certain way." Technically true, yet difficult to believe when drama strikes. Kahler's Myths help understand the nuances of how we stray from the basic existential position of "I'm OK. You're OK." These four myths are the driving force behind drama. Throughout this book I will show how one or more of these myths lurks behind so many of the negative behaviors and interactions that lead to destructive conflict. Recognizing and replacing these myths with the principles of compassionate accountability is unbelievably invigorating and freeing.

## **WHAT CAN BASKETBALL TEACH US ABOUT DRAMA?**

Dr. Stephen Karpman loves sports. He is also an internationally acclaimed psychiatrist, author, therapist, and former athlete himself. As early as 1965, Karpman was doodling circles and symbols trying to figure out ways that a quarterback could outsmart the defensive halfback in football, or how offense beats defense in basketball. As the quarterback for the Delta Tau Delta fraternity football team at Duke, he would trick the defense by looking at two different receivers, then throwing to the third. Score! He also developed a

matching set of fakes in basketball: a little fake, a big fake, then a third way to score. He went on to develop a sophisticated model of how games get played out in human interaction, discovering that it all comes down to triangles and roles. An offense lures a defense into expecting a certain role from the players who are interacting through triangles. Without notice, one or more of the players switch roles, leaving the defense wondering what happened.

Off the court, people do the same thing! We play one or more “expected” roles. And then, seemingly without notice, we switch, inviting confusion, frustration, guilt, and other nasty emotions that influence people to do what we want, in order to get what we want. The difference is that in real life, the switch causes a lot more problems than allowing a few points or missing a screen.

To explain what he discovered, Dr. Karpman developed the Drama Triangle, a model that describes how three different negative roles play off each other to keep us all guessing and, in the process, perpetuate unhealthy behavior. For this innovative work, he was awarded the Eric Berne Memorial Scientific Award by the International Transactional Analysis Association. One of the most elegant and practical models of how people interact in distress, the Drama Triangle has been an inspiration for our Leading Out of Drama® conflict communication methodology, as well as for our online Drama Resilience Assessment (DRA™). According to Karpman, it takes three to tango. Let’s meet the three roles of drama.



## THE PERSECUTOR

At Drama Corp, Fred is the Persecutor. In drama, he resorts to criticism, questioning motives, accusations, and insults. This behavior is driven by the belief that he's OK and others are not OK, so therefore it's OK to behave this way. Whether he is aware of it or not, he has adopted the myth that he can make others feel bad to get what he wants. Fred justifies his behavior with statements like, "Sometimes you just have to show them who's boss," or "You gotta bring the hammer down or they won't respect you." Or he might declare: "They deserve it. I'm going to teach them a lesson."

Fred projects rage, arrogance, and righteous indignation to intimidate others, who most often just go along with him. Rarely does anyone confront Fred on his behavior because they are afraid of him. Even Greta, his executive peer, implicitly validates his position by agreeing or avoiding confrontation. Fred doesn't realize that he's sacrificed respect for being feared. Yet, deep down in places he doesn't want to talk about, he knows he's a tyrant. He's miserable, his family is miserable, and his people are looking for a ticket out of his department.

Fred spends a lot of energy justifying his behavior by seeking out others, like Greta, to agree with him about how worthless Sally is, or by looking to catch Sally doing something wrong in order to prove his belief that she's not OK. His self-justifying tunnel vision leads to a delusional view of reality in which people are essentially stupid, lazy and uncommitted, and will take advantage of you if you don't keep them in line. When Fred attends leadership trainings, he only "hears" things that support his view. He picks and chooses tools that perpetuate his adversarial tactics, and assiduously avoids any responsibility for his behavior.

## THE VICTIM

Sally, along with several others in the Drama Corp staff meeting, play the role of Victim. In drama, Victims overadapt, surrender, lose assertiveness, accept blame for things they didn't do, and internalize the negative energy around them to avoid conflict and rejection. They are driven by the belief that others are OK, but they are not OK, therefore it's OK for people like Fred to mistreat them. Whether she's aware of it or not, Sally has adopted the myth that others can make her feel bad to coerce her into doing things, or they can make her feel good by approving of her or showing pity. She allows Brett to align with her against Fred in private because it helps her feel better but doesn't hold her accountable to do anything different. One of the most typical signs of drama is

when people continually gossip and vent to feel justified, but take no responsibility for changing their behavior.

Sally justifies her behavior with Fred with statements like, “He’s just trying to make me stronger” or “I probably deserved it” or “If I just do what Fred wants for long enough, eventually he will like me.” She projects feelings of sadness and low self-esteem to reinforce that she’s not valuable and to garner sympathy from others. These emotions also invite criticism from other Persecutors who are frustrated with her avoidance, mistakes and lack of assertiveness. This disapproval serves to further reinforce her feelings of worthlessness.

Sally doesn’t realize that she’s sacrificed her own self-worth in the interest of keeping the peace and avoiding conflict. Yet deep down, she is angry about how she is treated and fantasizes about one day standing up to all the Freds in her world. Meanwhile, she spends a lot of time justifying her behavior by seeking out people who tell her how badly she’s being treated or give her advice that she’ll never act on. Her focus on her internal struggle distracts her from the world around her and she thus sets herself up for criticism through the choices she makes, whether it means coming in late to staff meetings or spilling coffee on Fred’s new shoes. Sally’s self-justifying tunnel vision leads to a delusional worldview that it’s her destiny to get hurt. She is convinced that if she were to stick up for herself, she would get rejected and bad things would happen.

### **THE RESCUER**

Jim plays the role of Rescuer. In drama, he is more than willing to meddle in other people’s business, show them the right way to do things, offer unsolicited advice, and push resources on them to help them be more OK. Jim is driven by the belief that he’s OK and others would be more OK if they’d just let him help them, therefore it’s OK to behave this way. Whether he’s aware of it or not, Jim has adopted the myth that he can make others feel good by doing the thinking for them, by showing them the error of their ways and the benefits of his. He thinks he’s smart to give Sally advice in private because if it goes well, he can remind her of how he saved her butt. If it goes badly, he can blame her for not doing it right. Either way, Jim “wins” and reinforces Sally’s dependence on him to rescue her.

Jim justifies his behavior by telling himself, “I know what’s best,” or “If I don’t show her how, she won’t do it right,” or “I’m telling her this for her own good,” or “She’s going to have to toughen up to make it. She should be grateful for my advice.” Jim projects emotions of aloofness and arrogance to



reinforce that he has it all figured out and others would be wise to recognize his intelligence and experience. His attitude and self-statements justify his need to be the savior.<sup>3</sup>

Jim doesn't recognize that he has invited others to sacrifice empowerment, competence and accountability, and exchange them for dependence. Deep down, he desperately wants to be genuinely connected with others and feel he's making a positive difference, yet he can't bring himself to help others develop their own autonomy because it would threaten his need to be the expert. Meanwhile, he spends a lot of energy justifying his behavior by reminding people of how terrific his solutions are, and looking for other people's problems he can fix.

Jim's self-justifying tunnel vision leads to a delusional worldview that he's been put on this earth to save others from stumbling down the wrong path.

The next table summarizes the features of the three Drama Roles illustrated in the Drama Corp scenario.

***Drama Roles with Associated Beliefs, Behaviors, Justifications, Myths, and Projected Emotions***

Role	Belief	Behaviors	Justification	Myth	Projected Emotions
Persecutor	I'm OK. You're not OK.	Verbally attacking others for being lazy, stupid, uncommitted, disorganized; blaming; manipulation; giving ultimatums; coercion.	Because you are the problem, it's OK for me to use fear, intimidation, and guilt to get what I want.	I can make you feel bad emotionally.	Rage, Frustration, Vengefulness, Righteous Indignation, Arrogance
Victim	I'm not OK. You're OK.	Overadapting, withdrawal, making silly mistakes, avoiding conflict, lack of assertiveness, self-doubt.	Because I am the problem, I will feel hurt because I don't deserve to be treated with dignity. I can get what I want when people pity me or try to save me.	You can make me feel good emotionally by rescuing me.  or  You can make me feel bad emotionally by blaming or attacking me.	Sadness, Insignificance, Fear

Role	Belief	Behaviors	Justification	Myth	Projected Emotions
Rescuer	I'm OK, you would be OK if you accepted my help and were grateful.	Meddling with unsolicited advice, withdrawing support to "toughen people up," tough love to make people better.	Because I know best, I need to help you and you would be better off if you accepted my help. I can get what I want by inviting you to let me show you how to be OK.	I can make you feel good by showing you how to be stronger and more perfect.	Superiority, Aloofness

### WHAT'S IN A TRIANGLE?

Besides the fact that there are only three primary drama roles, the triangle image is critical to understanding how drama works. First of all, note that it is an equilateral triangle. All sides are of equal length, and all internal angles are the same, too. This means that each role has equal responsibility for drama. Second, the triangle is standing on its point. This illustrates how unstable the triangle is, that drama is a very volatile dynamic. Things can topple at any moment. Victim is at the bottom, representing how victims find and position themselves in the losing spot most of the time. The bi-directional arrows show that every role needs every other role in a dysfunctional, enabling way. No role can justify itself without another role to complement it. Without a Victim, the Persecutor has no one to attack. Without a Rescuer, the Victim has no one to be saved by. Without the Persecutor-Victim dynamic, the Rescuer would have no one to save.

These dynamics make the Drama Triangle very resistant to change. Because every role needs the others, and because nature hates a vacuum, every role actively recruits for other roles to fill the gap. If you've ever tried to make a major life change such as beating an addiction, leaving an abusive partner, or turning around a company culture, you have probably recognized your own drama and sought a way out. You have experienced the powerful pull of drama like a sinister vortex. You understand how hard it is to resist the invitations when everyone around you expects you to play the role you've always played so that they can keep doing what they've always done.

## THE INTERNAL DRAMA TRIANGLE

Karpman's research showed that drama manifests externally through our overt behaviors, and also internally through the "voices in our head." Behind every drama role is an internal drama-triangle dialogue that supports it. The voices come from parents, significant others, teachers, and other persons whose unconditional acceptance and approval mattered to us.

Externally, Sally played a Victim role. If we could get inside Sally's head, we might hear this dialogue:

*"You'll never amount to anything! You're just like your worthless mother!"* (Inner Persecutor)

*"Are you going to let him talk to you like that? You're only making things worse by keeping quiet."* (Inner Rescuer)

*"It's hopeless. No matter what I do, Fred won't like me."* (Inner Victim)

Externally, Fred played a Persecutor role. Inside Fred's head we might hear the following dialogue:

*"You're a fraud. If the CEO knew the truth, he'd fire you in an instant!"*  
(Inner Persecutor)

*"If you don't show them who's boss, they'll walk all over you."* (Inner Rescuer)

*"Nobody respects me. I've lost control and ruined the one chance I had to gain respect from the CEO."* (Inner Victim)

Externally, Jim played the Rescuer role. What's going on behind the scenes that perpetuates his drama? He might be saying to himself:

*"Nobody cares about your stupid advice. They just act like they are listening."* (Inner Persecutor)

*"You better make sure Fred knows how helpful you are. That will surely get you special recognition."* (Inner Rescuer)

*"I bet Fred promoted me only because I work extra hours, not because I have any real talent." (Inner Victim)*

Recognizing our own internal drama dialogue can help us gain insight into how we developed these patterns in the first place, and why we act out our own external roles the way we do. Throughout this book you will be given insights and guides to better understand the dynamics and origins of your own drama triangle and what to do about it.

Knowing that behind every drama behavior is an internal drama triangle can also help us develop empathy for what other people might be going through on the inside. They are likely suffering, too.

On a beautiful spring evening in Newton, Kansas, I was on a walk with my wife and our dog. As we ambled along the country road we always walked, I heard the sound of a car behind us. I looked back and saw the most interesting thing. The car was idling along slowly with a dog trotting alongside. The dog's leash led into the car and was being held by the driver.

Immediately, I went Persecutor. "How could anyone be so lazy and unhealthy that she would drive a car to take her dog on a walk?" I asked my wife with a sneer. My wife didn't take the bait. "Maybe there's more to the story," she suggested. I didn't care and kept walking in the middle of the road, stoking my internal justification about this woman's lack of motivation and moral character.

And then she pulled up alongside us. "I feel so bad for my poor dog," she said apologetically. "I broke my foot last week and can't walk for a month. My dog and I both love our daily walks, so I figured I'd do this until I can walk again. I envy you two."

Before I verbalized anything to my wife or the kind woman, I became aware of a familiar Persecuting voice within:

*"Nate, you are an ogre! This is exactly the type of insensitivity your wife is always pointing out."*

*"Nate, you really should withhold judgment until you learn the facts. You know what happens when you assume."*

*"I'm such an idiot. I bet she noticed my disdain when she drove up and knows I was judging her. As if she's not suffering enough already."*

## THERE'S HOPE FOR CHANGE

The number one reason people contact Next Element is because they want to reduce drama. They are tired, frustrated, confused and angry. They are trying to achieve big dreams, but people-problems keep getting in the way. Teams are fighting with each other, invisible walls go up between departments, unhealthy competition breaks out, and people stop talking to one another. Research by H2H Dynamics, a leadership training firm with expertise in human behavior, estimates that 87-percent of the workplace problems leaders face are related to people issues.<sup>4</sup> This is consistent with other studies showing a strong link between relationships at work and overall productivity and performance. How can an organization possibly realize its potential with so much wasteful conflict going on?

Do you personally identify with any of the drama roles? How did you feel while you were reading about Fred's, Sally's, and Jim's interactions at Drama Corp? Is your workplace a Drama Corp? How about your family, church, or sports team? What personal and professional consequences have you noticed?

The Drama Corp scenario is an everyday occurrence in most organizations. And the cost is staggering. A 2008 study on workplace conflict found that U.S. employees spent 2.8 hours per week dealing with conflict. Annually, this amounts to approximately \$359 billion in paid hours (based on average hourly earnings of \$17.95) or the equivalent of 385 million working days per year.<sup>5</sup> Add to this the psychological, physical, and emotional toll and the drag on our economy is colossal.

Thankfully, there's hope! While humans are hardwired to react with drama behavior, I doubt that most people really want to get up every day and act out their worst selves. With awareness, effort, courage, support, and practice, people, teams and whole organizations can significantly reduce drama and replace it with healthier and more productive patterns of interacting. We see these positive changes every day!

KASA Companies makes control systems for automated material-handling operations. Their clients include large automotive manufacturers such as General Motors and Toyota. Dan Stutterheim, the president of KASA, approached Next Element because he wanted to reduce drama within it's executive team. Not that people were at each other's throats, simply that the team wasn't coalescing as smoothly as Dan wanted. Their new vision was to be "a great place to work" and Dan knew it all started with their top leadership team. We embarked on a training and coaching program with the 12-member

executive team to leverage their existing strengths and install more effective ways of relating and making decisions. One year later, they were communicating better, working as a team, supporting each other, addressing the real issues more openly, and spending more time focused on strategic priorities.

The most dramatic change Dan noticed was that his team spent less time in meetings. Meetings were more open, creative, and accountable than before. There was less avoiding, blaming, or talking around the issues. Dan was curious what this change was worth, so he compared time spent in meetings before their work with us, and time spent afterwards. Multiplying the saved hours by the value of those hours for each of his executive team members, he estimated \$50,000 savings in one year. Add to that the ripple effect of healthier leaders, the additional impact they had by spending time with their people instead of in meetings, and the overall impact was likely many times greater than Dan's estimate.

Great leaders see drama coming a mile away and choose not to play a role in it. They develop alternative ways of influencing excellence to preserve everyone's dignity and stay focused on the most important priorities. The rest of this book is dedicated to helping you leverage positive conflict to interrupt drama in yourself, your relationships, and your organizations.

### **THE SILVER LINING**

I believe in focusing on strengths. Playing to our strengths is a great way to gain momentum, develop confidence and maximize our potential. For some of us, those strengths are visible most of the time because we have developed the awareness and tools to avoid being triggered by external drama. For others, these strengths are intermittently available when we aren't in drama. For many, the drama has infected us for so long that we've forgotten our strengths, or they've been misused for so long that we've forgotten how it feels to shine. Really *shine*.

In our research on workplace drama, performance and personality,<sup>6</sup> we've discovered that behind each negative drama role are positive capacities that lay dormant or have been misused. The next three tables show these capacities:

***The Positive Strengths behind Persecutor Behaviors***

Negative Behavior	Latent or Misused Positive Strength
Intimidating	Dedicated
Self-Righteous	Committed
Judgmental	Conscientious
Blaming	Creative
Vengeful	Playful
Sarcastic	Spontaneous
Rigid	Responsible
Obsessive	Organized
Irrational	Logical
Manipulative	Persuasive
Jealous	Charismatic
Disingenuous	Charming
Rule-breaking	Adaptable

Let’s take the skills of Organization as an example. People who are organized are a great asset in terms of their ability to synthesize ideas, keep things in order, and adhere to structure. And when they are in drama, they persecute others by becoming obsessive around order, criticizing others for being sloppy, or creating overly complex procedures that waste everyone’s time. They might say, “Why can’t you get it right! Don’t be such an idiot.”

Let’s look at adaptability. We need flexible people who can respond to the unexpected and thrive under pressure. On the dark side, these same people can become Persecutors, disregarding rules and setting up negative drama so that others are caught off guard, pressuring them to adapt to the unexpected surprise. “Who needs rules,” they argue. “As long as you don’t get caught, it doesn’t matter.”

### *The Positive Strengths behind Rescuer Behaviors*

Negative Behavior	Latent or Misused Positive Strength
Offers unsolicited advice	Dedicated
Has unrealistic expectations	Committed
Points out what's wrong	Conscientious
Invites others to question their autonomy	Persuasive
Smooth-talks to avoid negative publicity	Charming
Removes support, expecting others to toughen up	Adaptable

Here's an example: We value people who are conscientious. They are trustworthy and we can count on them to keep our highest values in mind. And they can misuse this strength by falling into Rescuer mode, pointing out what everyone else is doing that's wrong. They convince themselves that it's noble to pursue excellence by finding and pointing out everything that's missing or broken.

Likewise, persuasive, charismatic people are a great asset because they can get people on board with any initiative. But when these same people fall into the Rescuer role, they start to persuade people to question their own autonomy and to "stick up for themselves" in a way that causes more trouble. They may say something like, "You aren't going to let Fred talk to you like that, are you?" Consider someone who is warm and caring by nature. In drama, they may play the Victim role, their warmth mutating into emotionality. If there is too much disclosure, too much sharing, and too much caring, others can feel smothered and react negatively. "I probably shouldn't share this," or "You're going to hate me for telling you this," are set-ups for rejection.

How about the spontaneous person who has the gift of being able to have fun in the moment? When playing the Victim role, they seem to lose their ability to think on their feet, as if their IQ just dropped 40 points. Have you ever seen a creative person all of a sudden start saying things like, "What? I don't get it." or, "What were we supposed to do?" Unconsciously "playing dumb" is an invitation for a Rescuer to come save them.

One of the key qualities of a good leader is the ability to solve problems without creating new ones. This is only possible when character strengths are leveraged positively, not under the influence of drama.



***The Positive Strengths behind Victim Behaviors***

Negative Behavior	Latent or Misused Positive Strength
Adapts too readily	Compassionate
Takes things too personally	Sensitive
Overly emotional	Warm
Can't think clearly	Spontaneous
Tries hard to understand but can't	Creative
Acts silly	Playful
Overthinks	Logical
Overworks	Responsible
Gets caught up in details	Organized
Doesn't share ideas	Reflective
Doesn't interact	Imaginative
Doesn't show emotion	Calm

One of the key qualities of a good leader is the ability to solve problems without creating new ones.

What if the energy expended in drama was redirected to leveraging the multiple strengths we have within us? How much happier would we feel? How much more productive would we be? How much less stress and illness would we suffer?

The lists of behaviors and associated strengths in this chapter can be used in a variety of ways to illuminate and predict drama, and point towards more healthy alternatives.

**CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES OF DRAMA-BASED LEADERSHIP**

When cultures are defined by drama, the dynamics and consequences are predictable. Over time, a culture takes on the personality of its leader(s). People are capable of playing all three roles, but often play one of them more

consistently. When leaders lead from within the Drama Triangle, our research and experience have revealed the following characteristics:

### **Victim Leaders Breed Victim Cultures**

Victim leaders avoid conflict, play it safe, second-guess themselves, and anticipate bad things happening. Many Victim leaders are still in their positions because others feel sorry for them or are avoiding the necessary conflict to hold them accountable. Perhaps they've achieved some level of seniority or tenure that protects them. Their environments reflect their leadership type through these symptoms:

- employees with low self-confidence
- loss of respect for the leader
- a gloom-and-doom mentality
- believing that outside forces are in control
- low morale and engagement
- apathy and indifference
- avoidance of conflict
- avoidance of initiative, playing it safe

### **Rescuer Leaders Breed Rescuer Cultures**

Rescuer leaders are often the ones who were promoted because they were responsible and hardworking. Once in a leadership position, they never learned how to develop and empower others, instead portraying themselves as the indispensable expert who has all the answers. Their culture shows it in these ways:

- low innovation
- low initiative
- fear of failure
- analysis paralysis
- death by meetings
- death by data
- dependence on the leader
- resentment of the leader
- withholding information from the leader
- silos
- low levels of collaboration

### **Persecutor Leaders Breed Persecutor Cultures**

Fear, guilt and intimidation have worked before, and it's intoxicating to feel the temporary rush of power. These leaders don't get honest feedback because people are afraid of them. They aren't held accountable because nobody will stand up to them. They avoid information that would question their position, power, authority, or effectiveness. And their environment shows it through:

- secrecy, hiding, and avoidance
- cutthroat competition
- fear and anxiety
- blaming, manipulating, and attacking others to avoid responsibility for negative outcomes
- increased risk of abusive behavior
- high turnover
- increased risk of lawsuits

### **WHICH DRAMA ROLE IS MOST HARMFUL?**

Everyone likes superstar employees. Companies seek them out, give them the most attention and the best opportunities, generously reward them, and give them the benefit of the doubt when they make mistakes. This group of employees wield inordinate influence. Research from Harvard Business School<sup>7</sup> suggests that high performers are four times as productive as average workers, while other research shows that they may generate 80-percent of a business's profits.

Harvard researchers Dylan Minor and Michael Housman discovered another group that can have an even greater effect on organizations: toxic workers. These are talented and productive people who engage in harmful behavior. What makes these employees so damaging is their combination of high productivity and toxic behaviors. Because of this, they are not held accountable for their behavior, often with the excuse that the company needs their contribution.

Minor and Housman calculated that allowing a toxic employee to stay costs a company more than twice as much as the contribution of a star performer. Specifically, avoiding a toxic worker was worth about \$12,500 in turnover costs, but even the top one-percent of superstar employees added only about \$5,300 to the bottom line.

The researchers argue that the actual difference could be even bigger, if you factor in other potential costs such as litigation, fines, lower employee morale, turnover, and upset customers.

A 2012 Career Builder survey<sup>8</sup> found that 69-percent of employers reported that their companies have been adversely affected by a bad hire this year, with 41-percent of those businesses estimating the cost to be more than \$25,000. Another 24-percent reported that a bad hire (someone with lots of drama behavior) had cost them more than \$50,000.

Who is likely to be toxic? Harvard Business School's study also discovered that toxic workers were more likely to have certain personality and behavioral traits. They were overconfident, self-centered, productive, and rule-following. Interestingly, workers who said that "rules must always be followed" had a 25-percent greater chance of being terminated for actually breaking the rules. They also found that people exposed to other toxic workers on their teams had a 46-percent increased likelihood of being fired for misconduct. Toxic employees breed toxic environments.

Overconfidence, self-centeredness, and rigid rule-following are all associated with the Persecutor role in the Drama Triangle. Are Persecutor leaders the most toxic of all the drama roles? Maybe. Maybe not. What our research shows is that Persecutors are more likely to be in leadership positions because of their competitive, aggressive, and self-serving attitude. Consequently, they have more capacity to do harm.

## **GETTING RID OF TOXIC EMPLOYEES**

One of the most difficult, and most satisfying, parts of my work is coaching a leader to exit a toxic employee. No, I don't get any pleasure from seeing an employee get fired. It's the process of getting there, and the positive consequences afterward, that are so rewarding.

Most leaders have a very difficult time firing a toxic employee, especially if they recruited, hired, or trained them. It is tough to admit your investment didn't pay off, or that you couldn't save or fix this person. Working through this is a growth opportunity in itself. The toxic employee has likely built up a cadre of followers or sympathizers who will react negatively at first. This can be frightening for a leader. Toxic employees tend to act like children and throw fits when they don't get what they want, and this can bring a lot of negative attention to a leader.

Once the noxious employee has left, though, the results are almost always better than anyone could have anticipated. The web of negativity and drama that a toxic employee has woven over time is always much larger than anyone thought. And the gratitude and positive energy that emerges once the employee is gone is more than most leaders could have dreamed of.

That's the happy ending. To undertake and plow through a process like this requires humility, courage, and faith on the part of the leader. I've seen leaders mature and grow so much through this firing process, as they faced their own demons, reorganized priorities, and rebuilt relationships that had been compromised under the influence of the toxic employee. Firing such a person may make you a few enemies, usually with other toxic, drama-filled people. It will also reward you with a ton of new, healthier and more loyal employees!

Do you have any toxic employees working for you? Have you ever let a toxic employee go? How did the process unfold? What did you discover about yourself? What were the long-term consequences? What changes did you make in your own leadership behavior as you moved through this process?

If you are struggling with cultural consequences of drama and would like to make a positive change, then read on! This book will help you with the challenging process of leading out of drama. In the next chapter, you will learn about a healthy alternative to drama and explore ways to begin redirecting that negative energy into a more fulfilling way of being, both personally and professionally.

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**Want to enhance your learning experience?**

- If you have not already obtained your free Drama Resilience Assessment, you may do so by going to [www.next-element.com/conflict-without-casualties](http://www.next-element.com/conflict-without-casualties).
- Consult the Personal Development Guide in Appendix A.