

What Uber's CEO can teach us about leadership

The Drama Triangle in Action

It would be well known and accepted by our clients and colleagues I believe, that before someone can be a great leader of others they must have 'cleaned up their own act', [or at least be consciously working on it], so it doesn't get in the way of their being the best leader possible.

That's easier said than done of course but knowing your triggers, keeping them top of mind and having a Coach can really help. It's why we do what we do.

I was reviewing a 2017 video recently where; Uber CEO Travis Kalanick is seen arguing with one of his drivers. It shows how easy it is for any leader to get sucked into reacting in the moment. You can see how he goes from listening reasonably, to suddenly getting really ticked off and then letting rip at the driver, whilst out for the evening with friends.

If you haven't already seen it, you can [CLICK HERE](#) to watch the video.

You'll see the driver shakes Kalanick's hand as he's preparing to leave the car. The driver then takes the opportunity to state his view about the changes in Uber's tariffs. Kalanick's reaction to the fellow's complaints is a beautiful example of one of the most *useful* communication theories out there, **Karpman's Drama Triangle**.

Before explaining what the theory is about, let me say, that had I been in Kalanick's situation, I might have been upset at having been challenged by the driver, on a personal night out as well! On the other hand, had the driver opted to call Kalanick the next day to discuss the subject, or send an email, how likely would it have been, that he would have received a call/email back from the CEO? , Pretty *unlikely*, I would have thought.

So perhaps the driver was being opportunistic. He had the CEO of his employer in the car with him – why not?

What is interesting is that Kalanick's position and power were such that ideally, he would have been able to shove his ego to one side and not let himself be provoked in the moment.

the drama triangle at work

So, let's look at the Drama Triangle and see what this unfortunate incident can teach us about it. Karpman used triangles to map conflicted or drama-intense relationship transactions between people.

The Drama Triangle models the connection between personal responsibility and power in conflicts, and the destructive and shifting roles people play.

He defined three roles in conflict: **Persecutor**, **Rescuer** (the one-up position) and **Victim** (one-down position). Karpman placed these three roles on an inverted triangle and referred to them as being the three aspects or faces of drama.

- + **The Victim:** The Victim's stance is *"Poor me! OR: I'm not OK, you're OK"*. The Victim will often feel oppressed, helpless, hopeless, powerless, victimised and ashamed. They seem unable to make decisions, solve problems, take pleasure in life or achieve insight. They seek people who will 'look after them' or indeed, they might seek out people who will "Pick on them".

The *Victim*, if not being persecuted, can seem to seek out a *Persecutor*, then also a *Rescuer* who will save the day, but in so doing, perpetuate the Victim's negative feelings.

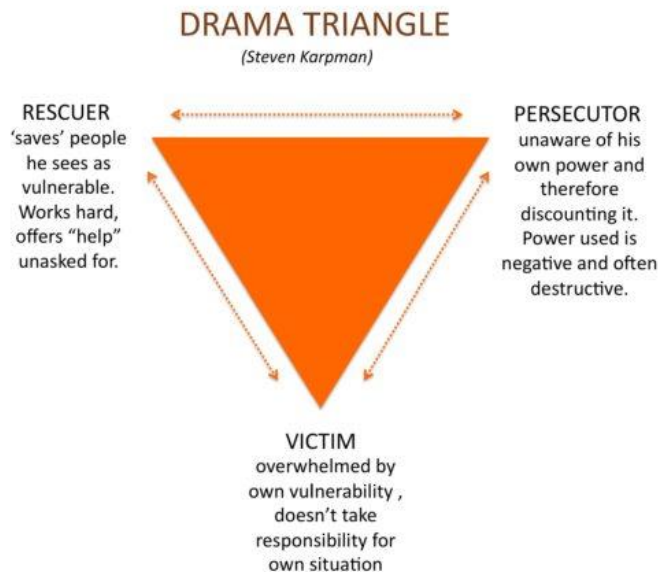
- + **The Rescuer:** The rescuer's takes the stance: *"I'm OK, you're not OK"* and *"Let me help you"*. As a classic enabler – Rescuers "take care" of others whether the other person wants/needs it or not and presume that others do not have the ability to do things for themselves. This occurs in family systems and in turn, we see this in the workplace and with our work with Teams. People take on roles and there is typically always a rescuer in a team.

In terms of leader development and growth, this behaviour has significant consequences: It keeps the Victim dependent and gives the Victim permission to fail.

The rewards derived from this rescue role are that the focus is taken *off* the rescuer. When he/she focuses their energy on someone else, it enables them to ignore their own anxiety and issues and allows them to maintain their primary interest, which is an avoidance of their own problems disguised as concern for the victim's needs.

- + **The Persecutor:** The Persecutor takes the position of *"I'm OK, you're not OK"*. And often: *"It's all your fault"*. We see this showing up in teams as blaming and complaining.

The Persecutor is often seen by others as controlling, critical, oppressive, angry, authoritative, rigid, and superior (source: Wikipedia).



So, if you're human and have sustained a childhood upbringing, like all of us, you are likely to favour one of the above three positions, over others.

Ask yourself:

- + **Which one or two of the three points do you tend to favour?**
- + **What is the impact to you and your team, colleagues etc when you default to this?**

When we're engaged in conflict [active or passive], our default to our favoured role will be triggered. Most often it starts with the **persecutor** or the **victim**. When that happens, the other people in the conflict are pushed towards their 'preferred' role in the triangle. You can see this happening in the video and I'm sure you see at your Exco meetings as well!

There are two crucial things to understand about the Triangle:

1. According to Karpman, *none* of these roles are authentic behaviour showing up. The Drama Triangle is basically a form of role play and I would add that it's a form of self-protection as well.
2. Everyone has at least one role in which they feel most comfortable (though often not consciously) and most of us have one role that we automatically step into, when faced with challenging work or social situations. We've done it since we were kids!

kalanick's reaction viewed from the drama triangle

When Travis Kalanick took that Uber on Super Bowl Sunday he was faced with a **victim**. The driver was complaining, placing blame on Uber and Kalanick without acknowledging his own responsibility in the matter e.g. he says "I'm bankrupt because of you" .

And Kalanick, most likely unaware of the risks of the Drama Triangle followed suit by retaliating and as such, stepping into what we can only assume is his preferred role of the **persecutor**.

The motivations for each of them is to get their unspoken (and frequently unconscious) needs met in a manner they feel justified, **without having to acknowledge any of the broader harm that might be done in the situation**. Each participant is acting without thought adhering to their own needs, rather than acting in a responsible or altruistic manner (source: Wikipedia).

Instead, we now have two angry boys pointing the finger at each other. Again, we see this frequently in our work with leaders and teams – bound to!

So, what to do?

the way out of the drama triangle (and into leadership)

Luckily, the way out of the Drama Triangle isn't very complicated but that's not to say it isn't challenging.

Acey Choy created the **Winner's Triangle**, and *The Power of TED* came up with the **Empowerment Triangle**. Both are basically the same in our view, so I've leveraged off another colleague's approach and combined them in one picture below:

The new roles of **Creator**, **Coach**, and **Challenger**, are basically the up versions of the Drama roles.

Instead of being a victim, **the**

Creator accepts the fact that they cannot do everything alone and that they may have to be a bit vulnerable. They ask for and accept help, and as such, make themselves powerful in their own right and work towards an actual solution.

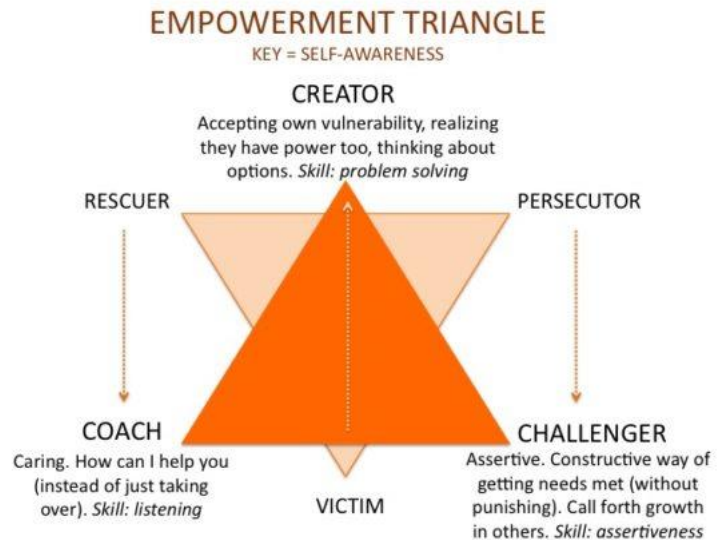
Instead of being a rescuer, **the Coach** shows interest and care, **asking** how they may help the creator, thus empowering the creator to decide what *they need* and *want*, rather than deciding and doing it for them.

Instead of being a persecutor, **the Challenger** is assertive about his or her own needs, without blaming the creator. This requires these often very fast, task-focused people to practice and demonstrate patience, otherwise [as I often say to my clients of this type] – you may as well fire your team and do the job yourself!

All of this has to do with **accepting responsibility for one's own position**, *without* asserting power or needing to dominate others. And the beauty of this is that as soon as someone *accepts* the empowerment version of their preferred role, the whole system changes, and the situation is lifted from *drama* into *potential*.

IMPORTANT:

Choice of language and having some well-crafted phrases [that sound like/feel like you] which you can use in challenging situations can be very helpful here - you can co-create these with your Coach or a colleague.



being the challenger instead of the persecutor

In the Kalanick/Uber driver incident what could have gone differently?

- + As the **Challenger**, [instead of the Persecutor], the biggest win could have come from Kalanick quietening down his threatened ego and setting healthy **boundaries** to protect his privacy.
- + At another time he could have acknowledged the actual event going on in someone's life (bankruptcy), without accepting blame, just showing some kindness and creating a human connection.
- + As the **Challenger**, Kalanick could have suggested another time to have the conversation when he was not on a social outing.

This would have resulted in something like this:

'I am really sorry you had to go through that situation. That must be/have been hard to deal with [It's always wise to acknowledge someone's pain and you can do this without gushing and taking it on].

This, however, is not the time to discuss it. I am on a night out with friends [healthy boundaries]. Also, I stand behind our decision to change policy and cannot take responsibility away from you, regarding the decisions you make about your life' [making it clear that responsibility for what happened lies with the driver himself, at least partially].

If the driver's message resonated on some point he could have extended an invite to come and discuss the matter at a more appropriate time, while making it very clear that he wasn't taking responsibility.

why is this so hard & what can you do about it?

The truth is, it's difficult to respond the way I suggested above when under attack. The amygdala kicks in [fight, flight or freeze] and we react before we've even had a moment to think.

But with a coach or a trusted colleague/friend you can prepare for this – by firstly knowing what sets you off - what triggers you and secondly by planning for that eventuality.

And as a leader, people are watching you – all the time. So there really is only one thing you can do before you can respond to people who take on one of the Drama roles: that is to know and work to resolve the things where **you are easily triggered**. Kalanick apparently is triggered by criticism – in this instance, unsolicited criticism. And he was caught off guard.

If he hadn't taken this personally and instead responded with calm stance and some compassion, he would have demonstrated more of mature leadership positions worthy of his CEO role and obvious business capability instead of coming across as an angry child protecting his hurt feelings.

In today's business environments remaining calm in the face of challenge is now accepted as an essential leadership competency [think Jacinda Ardern, Sean Fitzsimmons]. If that's the case, it's probably useful for leaders to fully understand and accept their own triggers and challenges. To take the time to work through the hurt they've experienced in the past and to deal with their Gremlins!

And, when we've done all of that - when we can fully own our story, our strengths and our weaknesses, when we are no longer afraid to have our ego bruised, **then** we might be ready to lead a multi-million dollar corporation or any team for that matter!

By the way, Travis Kalanick apparently apologised to his team when this incident went viral and sought out leadership coaching!

leaders rise above and look further out

The drama triangle worksheet

introduction

In the same way that you can't fight emotions with thinking, you can't fight drama with diagnosis, defence, or distrust - it all starts with stopping the reactivity first and pausing before reacting.

Try doing one (or more) of these things:

- + **Pause** – just count to five before doing anything [NB – NOT out loud!] and use that 5 seconds to reframe
- + **Breathe**: take a breath and connect with your body
- + **Move**: emotions require catharsis - some movement will help express frustration
- + **Ask**: as Stephen Covey describes in his '7 Habits' book: "***seek first to understand then to be understood***"
- + **Listen**: Listening both internally and externally is a powerful tool.

These help shift you away from immediate reaction and provide space to think. The more you practice this the easier it will become and the more 'natural' it will feel.

You can then pause and move towards the roles that will allow you to escape the drama triangle. You may even like to create a new persona, that you can take on. One with super-powers that allow them to rise above human reaction and act with calm, considered, non-emotive presence.

- + **Creator** (from Victim): Here we are empowered by asking for and accepting help - and showing vulnerability.
- + **Coach** (from Rescuer): showing interest/curiosity and asking how they can help the Creator – allow then Creator to decide that they need help and what 'help' might look like.
- + **Challenger** (from Persecutor): This can be a force of nature, a physical constraint or a person challenging someone else.

But all of that will be for nothing if the intention behind it is resentment, trying to change, educate, fix or disprove - then there is no natural compassion and it's easy to slip back into the Drama Triangle roles.

How to use this worksheet

1. Read the following sections with thoughts about transitioning from Drama Triangle roles, to Winners/Empowerment Triangle roles
2. On Pages 8, 9 and 10, complete the TRIGGERS and RESPONSE columns first. You may not have triggers of each of the roles, but more than likely will have some for 2 of them. Think hard!

Approach your friends, peers, partners, and the team that reports to you. They will all have insights and probably know your triggers better than anyone. This will require of you, a lot of 'active listening' and an complete absence of defence and criticism. This is an excellent test of your motivation and intent.

If you ask for help and then do not want to listen to what you are told, or simply spend the time justifying and defending – put the worksheets back in the drawer and get them out again when you're prepared to do the work.

It is also a great platform to evidence your new super-power... active listening and an intentional mindset.

3. In the TRIGGERS column, write whatever it is that triggers a reaction. It could be anything. A situation, phrase, attitude, person... whatever it is write it down.
4. In the RESPONSES column, write down exactly what your response is. From the first second, how do you respond. If unsure re-read No 2 [above].

Think of a specific example of when this happened that you can recall, put yourself in the moment and recall exactly what happened.

It may be an immediate response, followed by several other things...

A massive sigh, rolling of the eyes... irritation level increases massively, become tense and red in the face. Speaking becomes difficult and stress level is evident in the intonation, tone and timbre of language.

Words that flood in are idiot, lazy, careless, unthinking...

Be clear, be expansive, be accurate, be non-emotional. Sense how it feels when you're writing this down.

5. Review and complete as many as you can... keep going – till you've exhausted every possibility.
6. When you have completely exhausted the TRIGGERS and RESPONSES columns, turn your attention to the NEW RESPONSE column, column 3.

Start with just one of your triggers – one that you recognise will have the greatest impact – and develop and new 'reaction'. Only this time it will be well thought through and considered.

Be expansive. Need more space, grab another piece of paper, don't let the size of the available space on the worksheet impede you.

Again, be clear, be accurate, be non-emotional – be very specific and intentional. Sense how it feels when you're writing this down

When you have completed it – engage one of your friends, peers, partners, and potentially the team that reports to you, and have them practice your new response. Be prepared for the fact it may seem clunky and a little contrived – it's brand new for you so will need practice to get better and expert at it.

So do just that, practice it... a lot. Then wait for the opportunity to put your new response into action in a real situation. – it should take long.

7. The key to all learning is reflection. How did it go, what can be improved, etc. So it's important that you reflect on how it went for you. Ideally do it immediately after and think about how effective it was, but as or more importantly how it 'felt'. How did the other person/people react?

From this reflection you may decide to refine your new response for next time. It can be refined as much as is required. Just be authentic in the process.

You can even ask the other person/people how it was for them. In the spirit of development, listen to what they say, avoid justifying and blaming and learn from what they have to say.

8. Congratulations!! You're well on your way. Your commitment and diligence needs to be acknowledged and recognised.

Now that you've nailed one... the rest will be a breeze. Go back to the list and pick the next big ticket item... and refer to No 6 [above].

from persecutor to challenger

the 'internal' shift

The shift from **Persecutor** to **Challenger** starts inside oneself, because we humans have a strong tendency to judge and be critical of ourselves.

The "look for what's wrong" trait – which helped our distant ancestors survive by being sensitive to danger – can get turned inward and become your inner-Persecutor if you are not conscious of how this human default system works.

The inner-Persecutor views itself as "the problem" and the internal chatter becomes: "What's wrong with me?" Or, "Why aren't I prettier/smarter/more successful than others?"

Here are a few insights to support your inner-shift from Persecutor to Challenger:

Give yourself a break - Life is challenging enough without piling on more self-criticism and judgment.

Cultivate compassion toward yourself - Growth and change are not easy. As you become more compassionate toward yourself you will naturally become more compassionate toward others.

Embrace learning as a way of life - An attitude of continuous learning seeds the **Challenger** in you to take root. Our favourite **Challenger** question is: "What has this experience come into my life to teach me?"

The 'external' shift

There is also an external shift from **Persecutor** to **Challenger**. This involves learning to challenge others.

When in the **Challenger** role, you become a catalyst for learning and do so from a "learning intent." **Challengers** also are willing to stand for a vision and what they believe in, even in the midst of chaos and change. They are often called the "truth-tellers."

We've all had a **Challenger** in our life at some point; a teacher, boss, or grandparent – someone who delivered the rock-solid truth, whether you wanted to hear it or not. They challenged you because they cared about your learning.

While **Persecutors** want to control uncertainty, the **Challenger** is committed to learning and growth as a continuous process of life, even when the destination is not clear.

Here are a few suggestions to cultivate being a **Challenger** in relationship to others:

See the other as a Creator – whether they know it or act like it.

- + **Ask, what is my intention?** – Is your intention to build up and support others... or to put down and blame?
- + **Embrace your values** – **Challengers** are guided by integrity. They know what they value and believe and are unafraid to state it.

- + **Cultivate compassion** – again! Just like with the internal shift, having compassion for others that learning and growth is not always fun and easy, allows the other to feel supported.
- + **Focus on outcomes while being unattached to how you would do “it.”** – Again, as a **Creator**, they are capable to guide their own learning.
- + **Hold them as responsible and accountable for their choices and actions** – including the consequences that result.

A word of caution here – you can never guarantee how others see you. Your intention may be to Challenge without blame or judgement, but you cannot guarantee others will always see you that way. Don't let this possibility deter you from this powerful shift – stick to the suggestions above and remember... leave your ego at the door.

And finally, observing role models that you admire can help support your shift from **Persecutor** to **Challenger**. Who are those people you admire and/or look up to, that are willing to be courageous **Challengers** without blame or judgment?

How might you lean-in to becoming more of what you admire in them?

from rescuer to coach

To move from rescuer to coach, take these steps:

- + Be helpful and supportive by acting like a teacher or a coach instead of a rescuer or a fixer.
- + Help people learn to solve their own problems instead of solving problems for them.
- + Encourage self-responsibility rather than dependency.
- + Set boundaries on the amount of time you'll listen and provide support.
- + Ask empowering questions like: *“What would you like to see happen in this situation?”* or *“What can you do to change this?”*
- + Trust that the other person can solve their own problems.

People who coach listen deeply and acknowledge the experiences and feelings of others.

- + **Coaches** ask questions with curiosity to help others survive and thrive.
- + **Coaches** believe I can listen with empathy, but I cannot solve your problems.

Ask yourself the six questions below to check how often you use the behaviours of the **Coach**:

- + Do I say no to requests for help when I do not willingly and freely want to help? Or when I don't have the skills to effectively help.
- + Do I listen deeply with empathy?
- + Do I acknowledge what others are experiencing and feeling?
- + Do I ask questions to help others clarify their goals? For example, *“What do you want to happen?”* or *“What is your plan?”*

- + Do I ask questions to help others assess their current situation? For example, *"What is getting in the way of achieving your goal?"*
- + Do I ask questions to elicit healthy actions? For example, *"What do you need to do next? What is one step you can take towards your goal?"*

from victim to creator

Here are a few common **Victim** phrases to listen for:

"I have to... (fill in the blank)" "I can't do... (fill in the blank)"

By saying you "have to" or "can't," you are denying that you have a choice in the matter. Your choice may be a narrow one, and yet, you always have a choice.

Instead try this language:

"I choose to..." OR "I want to..." OR "I will..."

When you hear yourself say:

"I should do this or that..."

Shift to **Creator** language:

"I could do..." OR "I am going to..." OR "It's an opportunity to..."

Another way we limit ourselves is when we use the word "but" as a transition.

"But" discounts the first half of the sentence and has the potential to put us into the role of **Persecutor** to another (or ourselves) by using blaming or critical language in the second half of the sentence.

If you say, *"I love you, but I don't like the way you (fill in the blank)..."* What the other person hears is the complaint in the second half of the sentence and not the positive words in the first half.

Instead, simply make a clear statement, based upon what you want.

Drop the buts!

persecutor triggers	persecutor response	new challenger response

rescuer triggers	rescuer response	new coach response

victim triggers	victim response	new creator response