

The Quest4Life Podcast Show Notes:

Season #3, Episode #20: Escaping the Drama Triangle

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I don't know about you, but I, generally, cannot stand drama in relationships. That is not to suggest that I actively avoid conflict or am not curious about what goes on in people's lives.

For those that know me, you know that I am comfortable engaging in conflict and am happy to have others inform me as to what transpires in their lives. I just don't like engaging in things that, at the end of the day, prove to either be time wasters or inefficient.

That said, we all know people that actively create drama and doing so is common enough that reality television has made a fortune from it. One thing to realize when thinking about drama in relationships and/or if you find yourself trapped in your drama or the drama of others is that it can be extraordinarily detrimental to your relationships and is something to be on the lookout for in any context, such as romantic relationships, friendships, and at work.

And if you find yourself experiencing a great deal of drama with little-to-no resolution to the drama, as a consequence, you're probably stuck in the Drama Triangle. If that's the case, there are ways to get unstuck, which is to say that there are ways to level-up your mindset and push toward different outcomes and even achieve peak performance in your relationships.

The Drama Triangle

The Drama Triangle, also known as the Victim Triangle, is a social model of human interaction developed by Dr. Stephen Karpman in 1968. Karpman's model describes the connection between personal responsibility and power in conflicts and the shifting, and potentially destructive, roles people play. These roles include The Persecutor, The Victim, and The Rescuer.

When playing the persecutor, a person doesn't value other people's views or integrity and displays open or passive anger, aggressiveness, judgmental, bullying, demanding, and/or spiteful behavior toward others. A sentence that describes the persecutor sounds like, "It's all your fault" and is often perceived as the villain in the relationship, as they tend to control, blame, or threaten others with a false sense of superiority. Another way of stating this is that they hide their fear of failure or lack of acceptance behind defensiveness and disconfirmation when things don't work out the way they anticipated and then point to others as the primary causes of the problems facing the relationship.

With the victim, a person doesn't value him/ herself and defers to others through the active or passive acceptance of manipulation, helplessness, complaining, whining, "poor me" syndrome, and blaming. A sentence that describes the victim sounds like, "This is happening to me." People playing the victim role tend to hold the belief that whatever is going on is beyond their control, that they are responsible for their current predicament, and have no power to change their situation. This is different than being vulnerable because a vulnerable person doesn't lost control

over their circumstances as compared to the victim who believes they can't change or influence their present state.

Finally, the rescuer assumes the position that others are incapable of helping themselves and they must step in, which gives them the appearance of being self-sacrificing, overly helpful, and facilitative in addition to enhancing their self-worth by liking to be needed. A sentence that describes the rescuer sounds like, "I need to save others," which allows the person to assume the role of the hero in the relationship. This mindset is less about genuinely caring for others but rather it is grounded in the desire to feel better about themselves by being able to act. Rescuers thrive on people playing the victim role by validating their perspective and reaffirming the victim's state to create dependency instead of empowering the victim to take responsibility for themselves.

In effect, each role represents a state of mind, how we think, and how we act when dealing with differences of opinion or disagreements with ourselves and others. Each role also allows for people to hide underlying feelings, which prevent them from addressing the root cause of problems, which creates a highly dysfunctional environment for the parties of any relationship.

Breaking or Opting Out of the Drama Triangle

Now that you know what the shifting roles are and how each can show up as highly dysfunctional in relationships, let's explore ways you can break or opt-out of the Drama Triangle. It should be noted that if your default position has been to assume one or more of these roles in conflict, it will likely take some time and deliberate practice to break the pattern if for no other reason that our environment and upbringing play a huge role in how we manage and resolve conflict.

Here are some ways to become more self-aware to manage and resolve conflict more effectively by leveling-up your mindset.

#1: Acknowledge and take responsibility for the actions that helped create the conflict in the first place. Possessing a willingness to accept the contribution of your actions helps shift your mindset and see a different reality. Once you can reconcile that your emotions are real and fair for you, but that they may not be objectively real based on the dynamics of the situation, you can move toward demonstrating a greater willingness to think or say things like: "I am willing to explore how and why I fall into one or more of these roles." Or "I acknowledge that participating in conflict in one or more of these roles is damaging to my relationships." Or "I am committed to taking new and different action to improve myself and my relationships."

#2: Learn to recognize patterns within the Drama Triangle. By being willing to take responsibility for your actions, you open the door and give permission to your mind to discover new realities without deferring to old patterns of thought, old neurochemical grooves that are habitual. For example, think about the last few interactions with someone where you felt sadness, anger, confusion, fear, or powerless. From there, play that interaction out in your mind and examine the role through the lens of the Drama Triangle. What role or roles did you find yourself playing? How did others respond to you in that role? What role were they playing? Further, think

about past interactions you had with your significant other, family members, or friends that led to conflict and where you or they fell into one of the roles in the Drama Triangle. If you had the interaction to do over again, how would you have handled it differently?

#3: Set boundaries and consciously withdraw from the conflict. When most people realize a conversation has devolved into disagreement and devolved further into argument, it is easy to act on the first thought that comes to mind. For those of you who don't like conflict because you believe it to be both uncomfortable and unsafe, your first thought may be to avoid the conflict altogether. For some of you, your first thought is to get competitive because, by God, you're going to win the argument. Instead of potentially damaging the relationship, set boundaries for yourself and consciously withdraw in the moment, which is easier said than done, by NOT acting on your first thought. Try to determine what your second or third thoughts are about the nature of the conflict. Or ask yourself, "What if the opposite of how I'm thinking and feeling is true?" Doing so helps you create psychological distance from the intensity of the moment, which allows for finding greater perspective.

Shifting Roles

Now, each of the previously mentioned approaches spoke to creating a higher degree of self-awareness from a broader perspective, but most of us tend to play a role more often than not when we're faced with conflict. While this isn't always the case, we tend to show up in one role more frequently than others.

From Victim to Creator

If you show up frequently in the Victim role, you'll want to move to a Creator role. Instead of saying, "I need help," say, "I believe in myself, and I am responsible for my own experience." This shift in mindset allows you to focus on the outcome you desire instead of placing disproportionate emphasis on the problem. Practically speaking, get really clear about your goals and write them down.

From there, give critical and creative thought to how you can achieve your goals without the help from others. Identify and write down your strengths and move to strengthen your strengths. Once you've identified your strengths and how you can leverage them toward achieving your goals, practice inverse thinking, which is to say identify things that may prevent you from reaching your goals. This will allow you to see potential impediments and work to incrementally remove them as you progress toward your goal.

From Rescuer to Coach

If you show up frequently in the Rescuer role, you'll want to move to a Coach role, which will allow you to move beyond creating dependency to helping empower self-responsibility in others. Remember, the rescuer role IS NOT a selfless act but rather a way for you to feel better about yourself, which, eventually, does more harm than good in the relationship. As a coach, however, you believe people can take care of themselves on their own and it's your job to provide them with the tools and resources necessary for them to do that.

Further, rather than providing solutions to other people's problems, you help them find their own solutions, such as no longer support a victim mindset but rather support a creator mindset. To effectively shift your mindset from rescuer to coach, be sure to listen actively, encourage others not to give up, and help them learn from their mistakes.

From Persecutor to Challenger

If you show up frequently in the persecutor role, you'll want to move to a Challenger role. Instead of blaming or pointing out the faults of others, seek to be assertive by taking responsibility for your part in the conflict and challenging others to do the same. And when you find yourself in conflict, express your thoughts, ideas, and perspectives assertively but without intimidating others.

The goal here is to create win-win scenarios by offering constructive feedback, receiving constructive feedback, and managing expectations that you're not going to engage in a line of thought that will damage the relationship. Said differently, challenge expectations and place the integrity of the relationship at the center. Because you value the relationships so much, you are unwilling to do anything that compromises its integrity. This will also give you a better shot at consciously withdrawing in the event the conflict devolves into something irredeemable or deal breaking...and we've all done that to our great chagrin.

Final Thoughts

Consider revisiting each of the roles outlined in the Drama Triangle and then take stock of how they've shown up in your relationships...both within yourself and within others.

From there, consider the following questions in no specific order:

#1: When I find myself in conflict with others, what is my goal?

#2: To what extent do I prioritize the integrity of the relationship without compromising my values?

#3: If how I am approaching conflict tends not to work for me or the person with whom I'm in conflict, am I willing to change my approach?

Answers to each of these questions will, no doubt, help you level-up your mindset and allow your relationships to perform better...maybe even optimally. And for the sake of saying it out loud, all of this is crazy hard. It's really difficult. But what's the alternative? Keep showing up the same way?

It's time to find a better way.

As usual, it's food for thought, Fellow Questers.