

**From the Sacramento Business Journal:**

<http://www.bizjournals.com/sacramento/stories/2009/04/13/smallb1.html>

## Eyes on business

# Talk on touchy topics can lead to office tension

## Understanding roles workers play can help you neutralize conflict

**Premium content from Sacramento Business Journal - by Larry Mandelberg, Contributing writer**

Date: Sunday, April 12, 2009, 9:00pm PDT

Conflict in the office is not always about business. Any time you bring people together you have the potential for tension and dispute. Sometimes people simply react to other people.

A game that's been around for decades is regaining some of its popularity. It has been played in offices, homes and playgrounds for years and is starting to get a lot of play time in the business community lately. It's called the Drama Triangle.

Remember when sex, religion and politics were off limits for social conversation? Not these days. Seems people have developed a keen interest in politics and lost their inhibition to talk about it. Everybody has a different opinion, and that leads to conflict.

### **The Game**

How many times have you heard someone say something you disagree with and wanted to tell them why they were wrong? It happens all the time. And in close office environments it can be even worse. Conflict exists everywhere; it's not necessarily bad as long as it is controlled and used productively. The trick is understanding and managing it so it doesn't cause stress for you or others.

I can already hear it in my head: "Sarah Palin was great for the Republican Party. I don't know why people were so hard on her!" says one employee.

"WHAT!" says another. "Are you SERIOUS?"

The topic can be almost anything, but the intensity of conflict is palpable. If this sounds like your environment, you might already be playing the Drama Triangle game. It was taught to me by an associate five years ago and here are the rules:

There are three players: The persecutor, the rescuer and the victim.

For the extrovert, playing the persecutor is usually the most fun. He yells, screams, demands, is motivated by power and is afraid of losing it. The persecutor thrives on drama and has been known to start a new game at a moment's notice just because he is in a bad mood or when things are going too smoothly. The worst is when everyone else is doing just great, having fun and getting a lot of work done and the persecutor feels ignored. When that happens, get ready for an eruption.

For the person who likes everyone to be happy and get along, playing the rescuer is the most fun. The rescuer likes to do favors and speak on behalf of others. He is motivated by the desire to have people be beholden to him and fears not being needed.

The victim is often the last player position filled. Sometimes it takes a while for the victim to recognize the game has started and that the other players need him. The victim always feels persecuted, avoids responsibility, rolls his eyes a lot and loves to complain. The people who have mastered the art of whining are usually the best victims. The victim is motivated to shed responsibility and is afraid of failure ... and success. In short, everything makes the victim feel victimized.

The Drama Triangle is a major distraction for most in the office. It can also get tedious and monotonous. I'll bet each of you have a particular set of regular players from your office in mind right now.

While everyone knows the rules, some are better at playing the game than others. Many even enjoy jumping in to an active game for a while and playing a particular role depending on the particular conflict du jour. When you know the rules, sometimes it just feels good to play even though you know it is a total waste of time and energy.

There are a few people who have mastered the art of the Drama Triangle. They often like to change roles in the middle of a game just because it's fun for them — but it's confusing for the rest of us. They do their best to keep a game going for as long as they can. You know who they are: They like the conflict and thrive on the tension the game creates. These are the pros, the people that know all three roles and like to play them all.

### **Getting Off the Triangle**

Conflict has always been with us ... and it always will be. After a few months of playing, however, the game can get quite old. One of the problems with the Drama Triangle game is

ending it, or as I like to say, getting off the triangle. This can only be done through commitment and strength of character.

If you find yourself tired of playing and decide you want to get out, you need to know that the game ends when people stop sending messages to others through messengers and start talking to each other face to face. If you find yourself in a game and decide to get out, you may very well alienate some people who want you to keep playing.

The second most effective way to end a game is to stop caring about who gets credit for what. Harry Truman once said, "It's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit." When credit doesn't matter, the victim is neutralized and the rescuer loses all desire to play. Without a victim and a rescuer, the persecutor has nobody to play with, so he usually goes back to work and lets business resume.

The Drama Triangle is ancient. It describes the dysfunctional behavior of conflict in organizations. Once you understand what motivates each of the three roles you can start eliminating the stimulus that creates motivation to play.

There is good conflict, and bad. Understanding the Drama Triangle and how the game is played is your first step toward the good kind of conflict — the productive kind.

Larry Mandelberg is a principal of BullsEye Integration, helping companies reduce costs and improve leverage, making them stronger in these difficult economic times. He can be reached at [Larry@BullsEyeIntegration.com](mailto:Larry@BullsEyeIntegration.com) or 916-798-0600.