

Stop the Drama! Shifting Office Politics to Develop Healthy Working Relationships

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Turning office drama into an opportunity for improvement starts with a shift in your own perspective.

The mayor of a small community found herself embroiled in a battle with her city council over the performance of her city manager. The city manager had all the right credentials—he was capable, intelligent and highly qualified. But he was dropping the ball on important projects. Citizens were complaining, the council was angry and the mayor found herself battling with her colleagues instead of addressing real city issues.

The mayor, says executive leadership coach Donna Zajonc, had found herself in the center of the destructive cycle of office drama.

Executive coach and leadership development consultants Donna Zajonc and David Womeldorff shared tips on how to break through the barriers of dysfunction and shift the drama roles to healthier working relationships during an April 1 webconference.

Office drama, Womeldorff explained, stems from a fault-oriented viewpoint that is focused on reacting to problems. Rooted in this orientation is a set of relationship roles and dynamics that describe the situation: the Dreaded Drama Triangle.

Dreaded Drama Triangle

The central role in the drama is the role of victim. The victim feels a sense of powerlessness and self-pity; a dream has been denied or a punishment unfairly meted.

For every victim, there must be a persecutor, be it a person, circumstance or condition. In office politics, this role is most often played by a person. The persecutor frequently becomes the focus of the Dreaded Drama Triangle.

As the persecutor selects victim, the victim will seek out the third player in the Dreaded Drama Triangle, the rescuer. Those who identify as the rescuer frequently find themselves trapped in the role of a fix-it person. Like the persecutor, the rescuer reinforces powerlessness of the victim.

Zajonc advised the mayor to shift her focus from drama to empowerment. Instead of focusing on the problem, she advised the mayor imagine her desired outcome. By protecting the city manager from the council, she was preventing him from addressing his problems and sending a message the council that their input was not important. As they mayor focused on her desired outcome—for the city manager to excel and be a leader, and for her relationship with the council to improve—she realized her actions were standing in the way of her goals.

By shifting from a fault-oriented mindset to an outcome oriented mindset, she was able to create a new role for herself and a new dynamic for her staff.

The Empowerment Dynamic: TED

In the Dreaded Drama Triangle, the key role is played by the victim; in The Empowerment Dynamic, that role is held by the creator. A creator focuses on the desired outcome and leads in the face of challenges, rather than hide from persecution.

Through this mindset, the role of persecutor falls away, and is replaced with the role of challenger. The challenger can inspire learning and growth, either consciously helping the creator realize their potential, or unconsciously, by challenging the creator to confront a situation instead of avoiding.

The third role in this dynamic is the role of coach. Rather than depending on the victim to “need” them, the coach instead works with the creator to develop their outcome vision and create concrete steps toward realizing the goal.

Making the Shift

To make that shift, Womeldorff said, you need to own your role in the drama and shift into a TED role. He offered a few key questions to ask:

What role are you playing in the drama?

What do you want?

What is your intention toward others involved in the drama?

What is the caring behind the complaint?

As Zajonc explained the TED roles, the mayor became less fearful of speaking to the city manager. She saw herself as a coach and wanted to hold the city manager to high standards instead of protecting him from the council’s anger. After she assumed her role of coach, she was able to help the manager realize his potential. The mayor also realized her role of victim in the situation. By treating her council’s anger and citizens’ frustration as something to hide from, rather than use an opportunity to improve, she was preventing herself from leading. By shifting her viewpoint to The Empowerment Dynamic the mayor was able to lead through a crisis, rather than stagnate in a Dreaded Drama Triangle.

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