

DITCH THE DRAMA

BY ELAINE KLEMMENSEN, CEC, DVM

“WHEN YOU ARE IN A LEADERSHIP POSITION, IT IS EASY TO FORGET THAT YOU ARE PART OF THE SYSTEM—...”

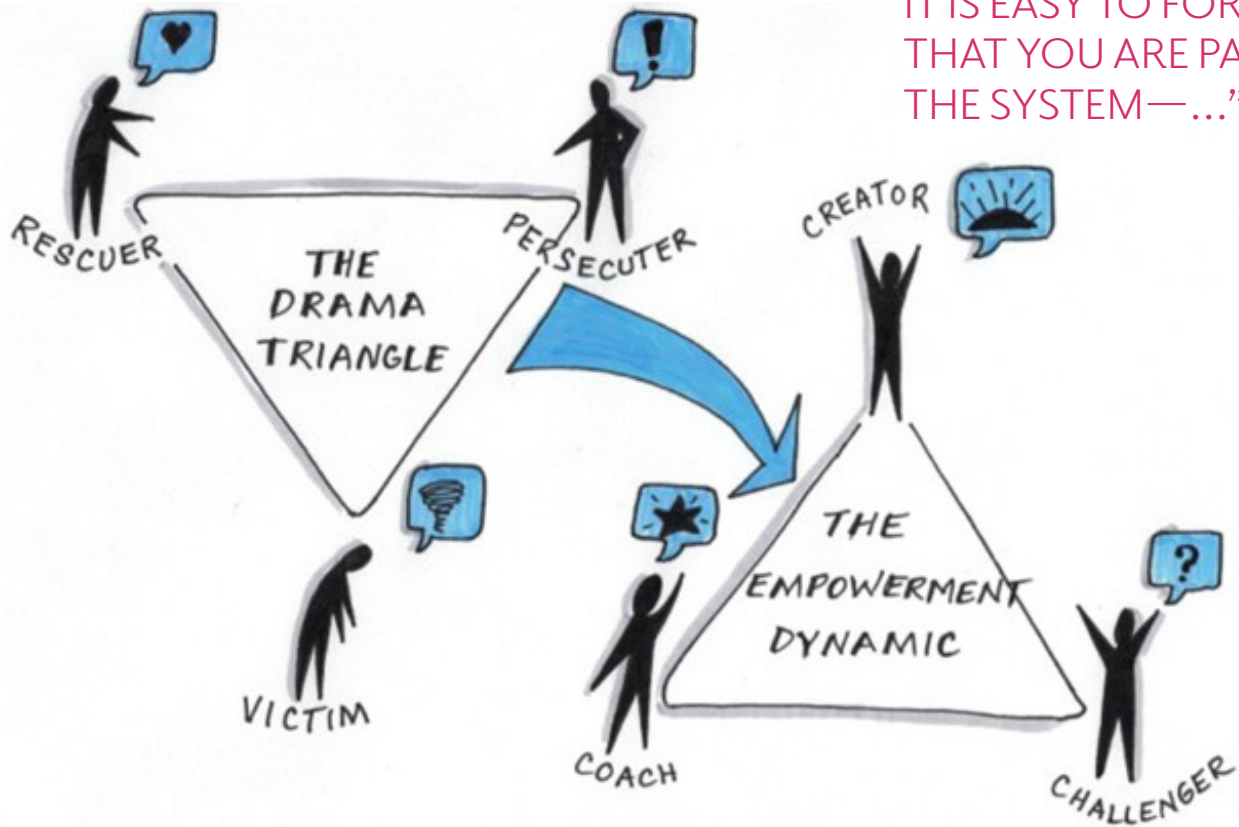


FIGURE 1: Original art by Elaine Klemmensen inspired by *The Power of Ted: The Empowerment Dynamic* (2016) David Emerald.

“Help me fix my toxic team!” When this request lands in my inbox, I stifle a groan, close my laptop, and take a few deep breaths. We all have statements or triggers that instantly set our blood to boil. My trigger used to be “you’re only in it for the money”, but I realized recently this has been replaced by “help me fix my toxic team”. I want to hit reply and respond with, “If your team is toxic, you need to take a look in the mirror, leader!” Instead, I breathe and think back to my own experiences with challenging team dynamics as a practice owner. When you are in a leadership position, it is easy to forget that YOU are part of the system—part of the toxic team. When we are so close to the problem, we get stuck in the details—focused on the who, what, why, and the “how can I fix this?” We are unable to see the forest because we are so focused on the individual trees. As leaders, thinking about our practice and the people working there as a system allows us to step outside of it and see it from a new perspective. This can provide valuable insights before we jump to “fixing”. Are you ready to dig into drama from a holistic perspective?

Cy Wakeman, founder of Reality-Based Leadership and drama researcher, found the average employee spends over two hours per day in drama. She describes drama as emotional waste—any unproductive thought or behaviour that affects productivity or damages trust and safety on a team. Gossip, tattling, excuses,

blaming, shaming, withholding information, and resisting change are examples of drama behaviours. They are also behaviours, if we are honest with ourselves, that we have likely engaged in ourselves. While drama can seem pervasive in our teams, it doesn’t need to be. Recognizing the patterns playing out and understanding the roles people play can help leaders shift the narrative to create individual ownership and accountability.

The Drama Triangle, first described by Stephen Karpman, MD, is a model that helps us understand drama and patterns of social interaction. In this model, players assume one of three roles: victim, rescuer, and persecutor. As complex social creatures, the role we play can shift depending on the situation. Chances are you’ve played each of these roles at some point in your life.

The victim, unwilling to take responsibility for challenging situations, people, or events, feels like life just “happens”. And they are powerless to change their circumstances. Trapped, helpless, and hopeless, they are looking for someone outside to rescue them. They blame the persecutor for their situation.

The persecutor feels that dominating others will move them ahead or help control the situation. The persecutor’s main goal is to find fault, place blame, or discover who caused the problem. Defensive, protective, and self-righteous, their goal is to win at any cost.

The rescuer is someone who strives to solve the victim’s problem or “save them.” They often feel guilty if standing by and watching the

victim struggle. Inadvertently, they foster dependency by relieving the victim from taking personal responsibility.

When exploring drama using this framework, it is important to remember the roles above are not descriptions of who you are. They are descriptions of how you are behaving in a given situation. These are roles that emerge when we feel triggered, threatened, or afraid, and are operating from a scarcity mindset rather than one of presence and possibility. When we step into the Drama Triangle, we end up playing less than effective versions of ourselves.

- Victim: my life is so hard, it's not fair, poor me, it's not my fault, I have no power
- Persecutor: I'm surrounded by idiots, I'm the only one who can get it right, I don't trust anyone, I'm right and they are wrong
- Rescuer: don't worry, I'll do it, it's my fault/responsibility—not yours, people need my help, I'm indispensable, I feel burdened and overwhelmed

If we all play each of these roles at different times, how can we flip the script on the Drama Triangle and find more effective ways to work together? The Empowerment Dynamic, developed by David Emerald, is a coaching tool that helps people recognize where they are acting from in the current situation and consciously shift from victim, persecutor, and rescuer into the more positive and resourceful roles of creator, challenger, and coach.

Victim ► Creator

A Creator claims personal power and takes responsibility to initiate action and achieve the desired outcome(s).

Persecutor ► Challenger

A Challenger provokes others to take action by challenging assumptions and the status quo. The challenger is focused on developing people and holding them accountable.

Rescuer ► Coach

A Coach facilitates self-empowerment through inquiry to help gain clarity. The coach believes the victim is capable, resourceful, and able to solve their own problems.

MAKING THE SHIFT FROM DRAMA TO EMPOWERMENT

The first step in breaking out of the Drama Triangle is recognizing the role you are playing and looking for patterns in how you respond when triggered, stressed, or challenged. Once you understand the triggers and your established patterns, you can start to reshape them. What specifically triggers you to jump into victim, rescuer, or persecutor mode? What happens in your body just before you react? How can you use this to make a conscious shift in your behaviour and disrupt the pattern? As a coach-like leader, you can help your team recognize patterns and triggers that keep people locked in the Drama Triangle.

The next step is to shift into a place of purpose and presence. When we approach our work, our relationships, and our challenges from one of purpose, it reminds us of what matters. Presence is a state of conscious awareness: being aware of what is happening right now, at this moment, in a non-reactive state. It allows us to observe what is happening without judgement and bring sincere curiosity to the situation. When you are fully present, you are interested in learning about the dynamics at play behind an event as well as your role in them.

To better understand shifting into a place of purpose and presence, think of it like stepping out of yourself to take the perspective of an observer watching the situation unfold. What is happening? What are you feeling? What choices are available to you right now? What is one thing you could do to shift out of old patterns and into a more aware and empowering response?

The following is a list of techniques and tools to help shift into presence and step out of the Drama Triangle:

- Breathing exercises—try inhaling slowly to the count of four and exhaling slowly to the count of six. Repeat at least three times.
- Consciously focusing on something you appreciate about the person or situation—what is the gift here?
- Finding the common ground or shared purpose and working backward from there.
- Changing your posture—stand up straight, shoulders back, head up.
- Focusing on your physical body—rub your forefinger and thumb together, feel the

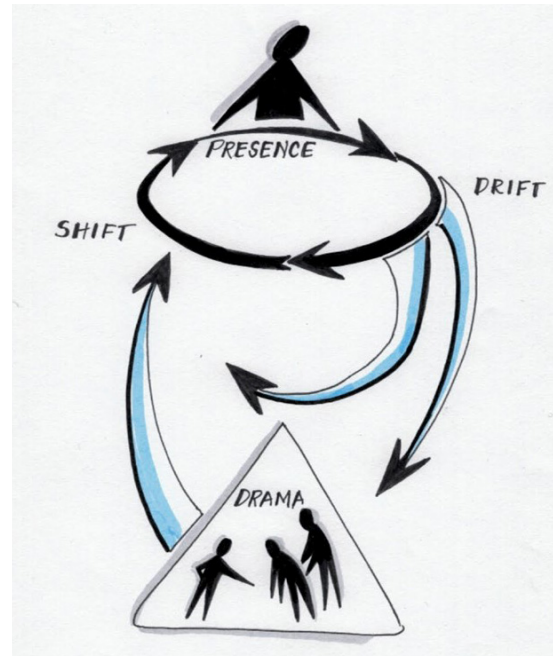


FIGURE 2: Original art of Elaine Klemmensen inspired by The Conscious Leadership Group at www.consciousleadership.com.

ridges in your fingertips. Feel your feet planted on the floor. Feel the warmth of the room on your skin. Listen and see what sounds you can identify.

- Practising conscious listening—what is being said here? What matters in all of this?
- Practising gratitude in the moment—what is one small thing you are grateful for today, right now?
- Getting curious—ask yourself “What can I learn from this?” or “How I am creating this?”
- Taking a moment to name your emotions as they emerge.
- Taking ownership of your part in the drama.

Stepping out of the triangle requires a desire to ditch drama along with a conscious effort to create a new way of being—one of presence. Building new habits takes time and consistent practice. Most of us will fall back into the Drama Triangle throughout our lives. We are human beings with human frailties, and at some point, we will likely play all the different roles—victim, persecutor, and rescuer—depending on the situation and our emotional triggers. It is okay to be imperfect. Give yourself the grace to fail, but don't give up—keep practising. With time, you will get better at recognizing the triggers, the role you are playing, breaking the pattern, and responding more intentionally. Finally, leaders need to remember everyone in the system is part of the system. The team isn't toxic; the system is toxic. Taking a holistic perspective, recognizing the relationships in the system, creating awareness, and exploring the impact we have on the system are critical if we hope to “ditch the drama” on our veterinary teams.

To save space, the references and footnotes for this article are made available on the SBCV website at www.canadianveterinarians.net/sbcv/west-coast-veterinarian-magazine. **WCV**