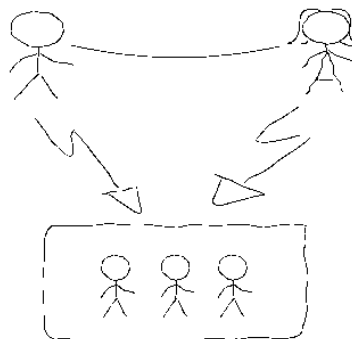


## The Illusion of Power: how to identify and break through dramatic triangles

**Paddy Ducklow, Psychologist**  
**Carole Ducklow, Marriage and Family Therapist**

The three roles of the Drama Triangle are the three positions that unhappy families use under stress. The three roles -- Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim -- operate to keep people in the illusion of power. The roles incorporate learned patterns of habit and control mechanisms that bond people together in ways that hurt and harm. They are symbiotic, destructive behaviors that affect all members of the family and organization. Paddy and Carole Ducklow will offer the theory and practice of triangles and how to eliminate these learned behaviors in the context of marriage, family and business.

### 1. The “Family of Origin” Experience: Nourishers, Challengers and Learners



**Diagram 1 – Father and mother with 3 children**

In families there are people who are typically “Nourishers” – these are the “coaches,” and the ones who reach out in the family and community relationships. In business these mentors develop deep relationships with others and are considered the parents or pastors of the system. They lead by walking around and making time for others rather than edict. Strategic planning is less important for these folks than is the company ethos, the feeling.

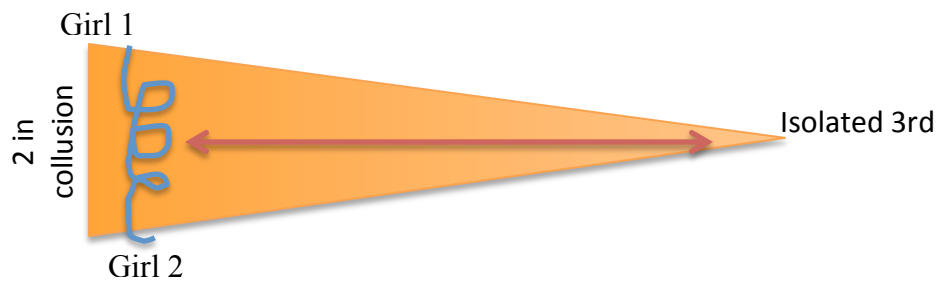
There are those who primarily structure and organize – these “Challengers” are assertive and use top-down power to make strategic change. Fast thinkers, they often present that they are right – and, often they are. But deeper than this, they have a need to be right and this usually results in others being wrong. Not afraid of conflict, they know that conflict is required to make change.

There are “Learners” as well. These people are creators and are being created upon by those with power over them. Kids are this way until they get to be about 4 when they figure they know all that there is to know; but they keep on learning nonetheless. Learners in business are those that keep on sharpening their skills, refreshing their knowledge, and expecting to grow, they will ask others for help.

In families, the 2-parent leading with one or more children following is considered a healthy triangle that reciprocates and balances. Submission or responsiveness is mostly normal and natural for kids – adults tend to pride up, defend, dismiss and define. *[Take a minute to understand your recent conflicts at home or at work. Did you not pride up with intent to pummel the other?]* Submission is the capacity to suspend judgement long enough such that new learning can go on and new resources can be developed. Submission is closely related to humility or responsiveness. It is the opposite of the coercion that makes one collapse.

## 2. Seeking Stability

Triangles are the basis of stable relationships. The pyramid is the strongest and most enduring shape in design. Triangles in relationship are similar. Typically two parts of a triangle “collude” at the expense of another. *[Two elementary school girls bind their relationship by not liking a boy and a triangle is formed.]*



**Diagram 2 – Collusion with an isolated third**

The family is the most primitive triangle and the most enduring. In Canada and less so than in the United States, the family is defined by an unmarried couple with no intent of marrying, and one or more children living in a proximity that permits both parents and children to grow through challenge and nourishment. Not exactly the definition of the family of 50 years ago where the wedding was the starting point of a therapeutic triangle.

This stability in a family or system is both positive and negative. The positive is that the security of the system upholds values and intimacy to the betterment of all involved. But to mature a system you need instability otherwise growth does not occur. People don't change or evolve without movement and movement requires challenge. Conflict is a kind of challenge for change.

Conflict is a kind of energy. You don't manage conflict – you work with it. We find conflict uncomfortable or upsetting because it removes comfort and results in unsettledness. It promotes anxiety and the body or system is required to change.

Triangles work. But in difficult families or offices or extended relationships, triangles cause and maintain more problems that they solve.

In friendships of three people, there will tend to be two who are close (inside) and one who is distant (outside). The outside person usually wants to be on the inside. It is difficult to maintain relationship between more than one person at a time.

The closeness can rotate between the players though it is more likely that the closeness will fix on two and exclude the one. This coalition allows the two to overlook their differences and focus on the other or others as the problem. (This is called the IP in systems or the Identified Problem.)

Anxiety is inevitable and human and this is the force that forms triangles. Anxiety flourishes when there is too much closeness (enmeshment) or distance (cut-off). If there are more people or personified objects around, it is thought that the anxiety can be diluted. This is how triangles are formed.

*[Bertha can't stand her sister Lamella when she becomes the 'authority' in the ways of parenting, yet her kids are the worst behaved! She tries to get her 'know-it-all' sister to see past her opinions, but nothing works. So she phones her mother and gossips while they both take a stiff drink, and acknowledge how glad they are that they don't have to live in her house.]*

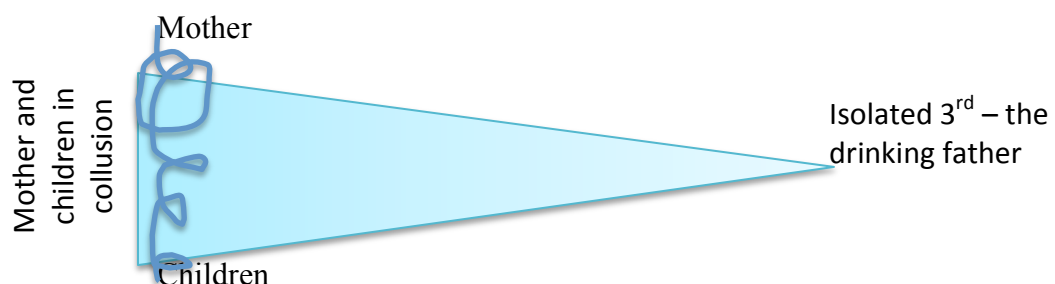
### 3. Handling Anxiety in the System

Anxiety responses are more likely when our most important personal needs are unmet or violated. These needs are:

- Significance: power, status and importance. Significance-conscious people tend to be extroverts. This person is most comfortable in a crowd and for this reason is less affected by being triangled out.
- Security: life and relationships are the same. Security-conscious people tend to be introverts. Their comfort is with small numbers and for this reason is more affected by the exclusive coalition. Often he will form even more exclusive coalitions to guarantee his security.
- Satisfaction: where one's identity is appreciated and needs are met.

Coalitions between two points in a triangle serve two functions:

To reduce anxiety. Closeness between two creates an intimacy that holds off the anxiety of a third. *[Imagine a newly attached couple without parental support. The more criticism from the parents, the more fusion between the couple.]*



**Diagram 3: Triangle with children colluding with one parent at the expense of the other parent**

To control or define the third corner of the triangle. [*Consider a mother's closeness with her children when the Dad is drunk. This closeness reduces the anxiety (as above) but it also defines the father as the person responsible for the family problems, thus limiting his impact on the children or the spouse.*] When the third part of the triangle is objectified, it can be managed and this handling reduces vulnerability.

#### 4. The Three Faces of Helplessness

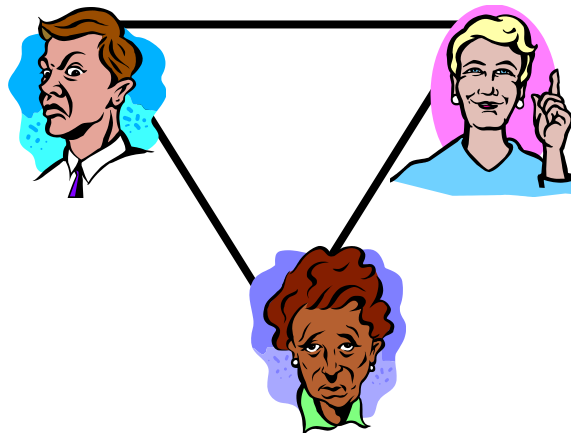
People may put on different roles for different anxious occasions or with different stressful intimates. This is to control the coalition and to remain supported and strong. [*Imagine Christmas with relatives you either don't know well or don't like much. You might paste on a smile to remove yourself from conflict or drink too much behind the Christmas tree with an equally frustrated cousin. Of course there are other ways of triangling, like getting mad with your spouse on the way home who you thought you caught flirting.*]

When anxiety is high, most people adopt an unconscious stress role; that is, they sacrifice their identity to avoid or deflect the pain produced by anxiety. The stress roles are Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim. They are stressed adaptations of the healthy relationships:

- The Challenger who structures and organizes becomes the Persecutor, quick to conclude, judge and generally scare the heck out of every Victim in the neighbourhood. You walk on eggshells around a Persecutor.
- The Nourisher who reaches out in care becomes the Rescuer who can't but help when someone else is perceived to be in need. By the way, this always available help is often not very helpful.
- The Learner who is learning and growing becomes the Victim who develops dependency to seek out the hand outs of various Rescuers and is often judged by the local, handy Persecutor. Some people you just can't help, especially those committed to Victimhood.

The various stress roles tend to balance each other like a child's mobile. Each role serves as the enabler for the other dysfunctional roles. You cannot have a Persecutor without a ready-made Victim and it greatly helps to have a Rescuer who really doesn't think much but has lots of Google type answers.

Confusion, chaos and crisis is the consequence of such stressful dramatics. These happen in homes, churches, dental offices, shopping malls, or wherever people gather. While the intent is to provide stability and support, triangles induce a greater crisis that occasioned the triangle in the first place.



#### Diagram 4 – Three faces of helplessness

When things get bad, entire institutions dissolve in P-R-V roles (e.g. labour negotiations, church-leadership arguments, international disputes, staff infighting, etc.). *[In a recent conflict between our cost-cutting provincial government and the very powerful teachers union, it was hard to see who was the P in the system as the both appeared to be harming the children and their families (V). In the end, confusion reigned and the government forced the teachers back to work, proving who could out-P the other.]*

Note: these roles are not identities. They are stress costumes when a person gives up on his or her identity. Identity is an intricate balance of experience, abilities and values, among other factors. Roles are simplifications that eliminate personality and reduce honesty.

#### 5. When the Solution Becomes the Problem

Secret coalitions can form in families. They are especially difficult to resolve because the family members are so resistant to deal with them. These secret coalitions are intended to solve problems by isolating another member of the triangle. This triangle member can be a person, a phenomenon, an obsession, a personalized object, or almost anything that seems to reduce threat.

There are lots of solutions that become the problem. Here are a few common ones:

- The Parent-Child triangle to exclude the other parent. Collusion between a parent and a child is intended to solve intimacy gaps in the marriage.
- The Scapegoat: the family try to solve another person's problems so as not to solve their own. The focus can be a neighbour, sexual politics and the like.
- The Husband-Affair / Wife-Affair to act against the other spouse in punishment. The affair-ing spouse feels neglected, disrespected (etc) and feels due for affirmation and affection. By the way, most affairs are not for sex but to balance a perceived imbalance in a system.
- The Grandparent-Child triangle to exclude the parenting generation with the intention of lessening the negative parenting on the children. These are Rescuers, un-thoughtful and reactive.
- The In-Law triangle to exclude the spouse.
- The Teenager-Peer coalition to eliminate the dominating and intrusive father and/or mother.
- The Burned-Out Executive who uses her or his work to isolate from family stresses that seem unsolvable.
- In the Alcoholic Family there is an alcoholic (who functions as the family Persecutor), the co-dependent partner who Rescues the alcoholic (e.g., designated driver), and the children or adult children who make their own way by repeated mistakes and social-sexual confusion – these are Victims.

It is a chicken and egg question as to the origin of triangles: did the neediness of one result in the excessive drinking or did the drinking person cause the neediness and dependency of the others?

Families may triangle around the other woman or man, or alcohol, or religion, or money, or sexual orientation, or race, and the binary list goes on infinitely.

Remember: we create triangles and play roles to solve problems. Then the solution that we devise becomes the problem that often cannot be solved.

## 6. The Illusion of Power (PVR)

People who see themselves as life's Victim and adamantly refuse to grow, are probably waiting for someone else to adapt to their world. People in chronic need see themselves as Victims (V), hoping to be Rescued (R), worried that the other will blame (Persecute). What is interesting about this Victim is that he or she is all the while blaming (P) some other person, system or organisation for Persecuting (P) him or her. The confusion of these sentences is indicative of the mental chaos experienced by the role-player.

People will escalate the helplessness, the blaming, or the sympathy to get others to change. In other words, people will do more of the same to achieve what they did not get by less of the same, rather than change themselves.

The Victim believes that by increasing neediness, that some Rescuer will see the need and respond solicitously. It is therefore imperative for the V to increase the neediness, day in and day out, day after day.

The Persecutor believes that by increasing control, that his or her world will be clarified and that peace will enter the system. Hoping for a warm world, the P is limited to a cold war with brittle restrictions and inflexible emotions. The P is confused why she or he is not loved by the Vs created.

The Rescuer knows without thinking that his or her platitudes and early-learned convictions are innately helpful and necessary. Always on the lookout to prove one's resourcefulness, the R attracts V like soggy bread to a seagull.



**Diagram 4 – The drama triangle**

<b>Persecutor without Limits</b>	<b>Rescuer without Limits</b>	<b>Victim without Limits</b>
• Finds fault	• Works hard to “help”	• Presents incompetence
• Often critical	• Harried, tired, worn out	• “Passive-aggressive”
• Leads by orders	• Frustrated often	• Super-sensitive
• Exploits with anger	• Exploits with guilt	• Sensitive to rejection
• Can feel incompetent	• Creates dependencies	• “I don’t know / care”
• Needs to be right	• Wants to fix it now	• Withdraws as reaction
• Fear of weakness	• Emotional thinking	• Strongest in triangle



### 7. The Victim... (“I feel safe the weaker I am”)

The Victim surprisingly is the most controlling / demanding role as well as being the most socially approved role. Who can blame someone as incompetent and dependent as a life-long loser? Note this is a role designed to manipulate others to un-thoughtfully Rescue. The V is anti-thinking or planning and uses qualifiers that discount his ability to be responsible for his life (if, only, just, even, etc.); the subjunctive mood tense heightens the qualification (“I would if...”, “I suppose I could, but ...”).

If the V decided to grow up – what Family Systems Theory calls “differentiate” – there would be no need for a P or a R. Both would be redundant for a while until another chronic underachiever came along to activate the roles of others.

Vs are thought to be losers and non-winners. A loser is someone who doesn’t enter the race of life, but watches it on a wide-screen TV, thinking that they are successful just sitting, often surprised that they are not chosen for any task or any game. A non-winner is also a V but does so seeming to participate in life but without the possibility of ever completing a task or the commitment to work sufficiently to succeed in something. This non-winner is a chronic under-achiever.

The V acts as if she is a mind-reader -- “I know what you're thinking”, “You're trying to get rid of me, aren't you?”, “Nobody liked me there”, “I know you think I am not pretty and a bit too fat...” -- and the more she reads minds, the more her mindlessness becomes reality.

The demandingness of the V's neediness is evidence, not of need, but of demandingness. It is the hunger to control from the one-down position, not the motivation to change or otherwise evolve. The complaint is a signal to the R to rescue and the P to back off. It is not a signal to change.

Many V's are in a chronic state of crisis. This crisis addiction requires a great deal of energy; energy that is not used to solve a problem but to perpetuate it. This crisis induces an equally chronic Rescuing that does nothing but perpetuates a R-V dependency. [*With all this wasted energy, a major city could be heated -- this said from my P self.*]

V words include: helpless, hopeless, defensive, apologetic, wheedling, playing-the-baby, passive, passive-aggressive, aggressive, sad, hurt, bitter, lazy, submissive, depressed, afraid, despairing, guilty, vulnerable. You could add your own to the list.

### 8. Rescuer... ("I feel safe by serving")



The R is the careless caregiver, the good scapegoat ("One of the nicest people I ever met!"), doing unto others as she would have others do unto her. In the guise of being helpful she keeps others dependent on her.

He advises carelessly ("Why don't you lose 10 pounds?") and gets lots of "yes buts" or elaborate "explanations" from his V dependents. The R's advice may make no sense in the other's context (the P will surely tell you this), be excessively pitying or simply irrelevant. In his attempt to be helpful, he is hurtful with his platitudes, self-sensitive sympathy and worrying put-downs.

The R has an inordinate desire for supporters. These Vs provide a kind of endorsement that the R is effective. He needs people sitting at his feet, witnessing his care and his soft wisdom. Inside the R believes nobody cares for her like she cares for others, and she often concludes that there is no place for her. This loneliness and isolation can drive him into frenetic activity and thoughtless attachment. Some R end up sleeping with the enemy, or at least the V.

Typically the R is a woman (or men who are affect dominant) and occupies the position of mother, pastor, social worker, nurse, homemaker, co-dependent spouse, etc. The R often defines herself in relationship to someone else (someone she is helping, another more prominent person in the community, the competency of one's spouse, etc.) and, of the three stress roles, is more appendage-like.

R words include: helpful, worried, tired, giving, insensitive, sensitive, burdened, confused, strained, burned out, caring, thoughtless, unaware, irrelevant, loving, supportive, pitying, nurturing, patient, careless, tolerant, ever-optimistic, aggressive, dependable, nice. Again, add your own to my list of R adjectives.



### 9. Persecutor... ("I feel safe by being in control")

The P is afraid of weakness and the confusion that feelings bring (wimp-phobic). Control is her only safety. He overcompensates by being too strong, too smart, too quick, too black-and-white, too binary, all in the service of settling the matter. Her need is to win; win the argument, win at parenting, win at squash, win at wisdom, just win. He is someone who sets unnecessarily strict limits on himself and others. His justification for his controlling criticism is that it works for him.

She becomes the accuser because pain in herself is too hard to bear. She stuffs down her own softer feelings (repression) as well as those she sees in the V (suppression). The P dismisses the R as irrelevant, weak and wimpy and has special judgement for the R-V coalition as being the problem with the world. [*Consider the P's judgement of social workers and the work of NGOs with the chronically dependent in the poorest sections of town.*]



Except for anger and "I'm fine", feelings are often off-limits or at least avoidable. In growing up he probably learned that feelings didn't help anyone and were usually a terrible bother.

The P neither listens to his inner self nor is she empathic with others, though she may collect data that reinforces her accusing / persecuting stance towards others. Then he uses words that disagree ("This is all well and fine but..."), his body blames, and inside he feels misunderstood and probably unsuccessful, but has a hard time ascertaining these inward thoughts and feelings. He speaks in universal qualifiers (all, every, any, etc.) and asks negative and downward questions ("Why don't you simply do...?"). He hopes that being a faultfinder he might enable people to be fault-corrected.

Typically the P is the more resourceful member of a family or a system and may be the husband or wife in the marriage, a team leader in the business world, or perhaps a rebellious teen or a defiant child in a chronically confused family. In many traditional western homes, this position is saved for the husband-father who is to be ever-wise, clear in thinking and in speech, but when stress rises the role is reserved for the "hassled housewife" who is clearly burning out (V).

Typical professions are labourer, border guard, car salesman, prophet, bank manager head deacon, Tough Love advocates, pastors of hierarchy churches, harried homemakers, oldest and most responsible children, librarians, brownie pack leaders, executive secretaries, etc.

P words include: anger, critical spirit, fault-finder, judgmental, blamer, aggressive, authoritarian, powerful, sarcastic, righteous, never-loving, dispassionate, certain, cold, accuser of the brethren, demanding, domineering, hostile, rigid, perfectionist, attacking, brittle, business-like, etc. What other words would you use to describe the P?

## 10. Partners of Incompetence

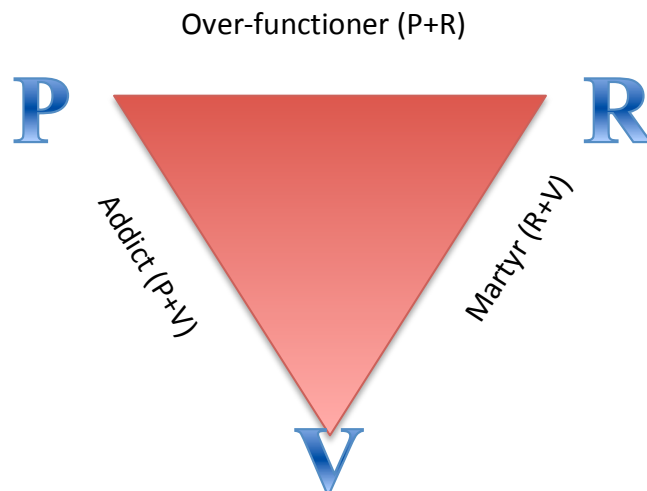


Diagram 6 – Partners of incompetence

The person who rapidly alternates between V and R may be considered a "martyr" ("I'm going to save you even if it kills me!") or in the ACOA understanding, a "co-dependent" (that is, addicted to people). This is the classic burnout. The martyr person is burning the candle from the R and V ends at the same time. Eventually some P comes along and writes a prescription to a psych ward; or a bigger R takes him or her to Maui for a week on the beach with various fruity margaritas.

<b>Over-functioner (Unavailable, Untouchable) P + R</b>	<b>Martyr ("If you would let me help") R + V</b>	<b>Addict "You made me do it" P + V</b>
• P+ R "switch"	• R + V "switch"	• P + V "switch"
• Others seen as V	• Others seen as P	• Others seen as R
• Super-hero	• Codependent	• Coercive
• Closed teams	• Enabler	• Justifying pathology
• Projection, defend	• Creates dependencies	• Collects enemies

The person who is simultaneously P and R (the "over-functioner") is unapproachable and avoids vulnerability. Some marriages are like this. This collusion results in relationships being short-lived, with the V respondents screaming angrily, "What is it you expect of me? First you pat me and then you punch me!" This is a classic double bind and works to the great frustration of spouses, associates and friends.

The P and V collusion is an "addict" explaining his or her exploitive behaviour on the trauma of the past. This collusion requires others to R them as there are no other positions available. How can you confront a person who has endured such a terrible family of origin? So the R pulls back and the addict continues her exploitive behaviour.

These partnerships of incompetence always require the respondent to fit the only position left available. The martyr is judged by the P; it's the only point of access to her. The overcomer sees everyone as a V to the further detriment of both. The addict requires R, hopefully a pusher of drugs, affection, forgiveness or whatever the addict needs to continue in unchanged behaviour.

## **11. Moving to Health – What can change and how do we do it?**

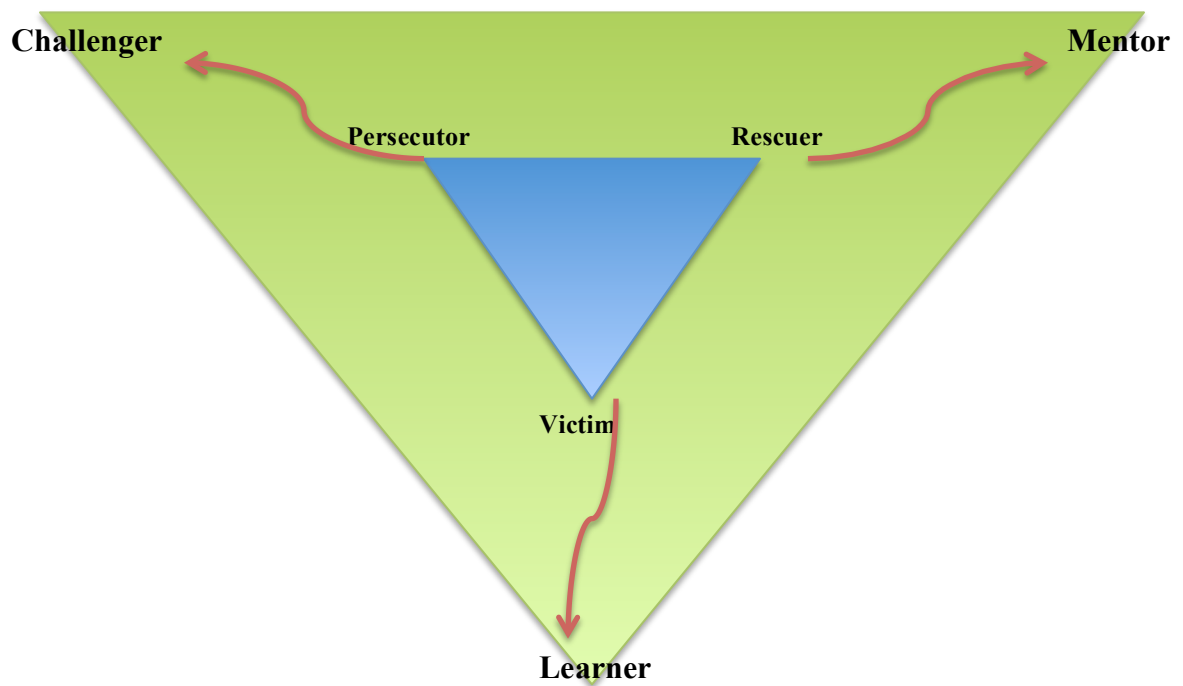
Parents ask kids to grow up and perpetuate the family belief that they, the parents, don't have to. Companies cherish their past successes by idolizing their founder's courage. Couples look back on their honeymoon and wish life could be simple again like they thought it was at one time. Do you see the pattern? They all handle the energy inherent in their emotions poorly.

Healthy people and organizations know their potential weaknesses. They know how they respond under extreme stress. They have learned something valuable from their mistakes. They know they have an inner world that could discombobulate their present lives. This destructive pattern is what we have described as the drama triangle.

We are speaking about energy – the P energy of anger and control; the R energy of careless care; the V energy of formless angst.

Working with that energy is the place of change, psychotherapy and maturity. The energy in itself cannot be gotten rid of. Everyone experiences hurt and harm and it cannot be wished away. But the energy of fear, anger, loneliness, sadness can be directed, worked with and eventually exploited.

We hear of people being grateful of great losses for what they have learned or gained. They have learned to handle energy. A friend of mine has been married three times. His first wife died from lupus after 38 years of marriage. He loved her and he lost her. His second wife of 19 years died from brain cancer and he loved her too. His third wife (I had the privilege of performing this wedding) married his second wife's best friend. He has now been married 10 years and he loves her. I ask him about his losses and how he handles his pain. He answers with the joys he has enjoyed. His consolations trump his desolations. At 93 he still celebrates his wins.



**Diagram 7 – Moving to health**

<b>Challenger with Limits</b>	<b>Mentor with Limits</b>	<b>Learner with Limits</b>
• Sets necessary limits	• Reaches out relationally	• Self-disclosing
• Contracts for change	• Self-care / Sabbath	• Plans, makes decisions
• Empowering of leaders	• Wholesome self-esteem	• Accomplishes goals
• Flexible directions	• Can-do attitude	• Builds relationships
• Builds teams	• Thinking over feeling	• "Sees" others

## 12. Tuning the Triangle: the 10% Solution

There is always a 10% OK reason to be a P, an R, or a V. It is when one defines her life by roles and uses these roles without limits. In every idea spoken from the PRV there is at least 10% truth in it. A differentiated person seeks to discover it.

It is interesting to note that about 10% of the population would act the way that you act, so you can always find someone who will support you as a Victim or a Persecutor or as a Victim. We probably know these people already because we match on other personality characteristics as well.

As well, 10% of what you are not saying you don't believe anyway. Have you ever caught yourself in a grand declaration that makes not sense to you but you are still committed to it? I am usually a P when I am proclaiming some truthiness that makes no sense.

The idea in tuning the triangle is to back off your 100% commitment as if you were entirely right and without fault or correction.

## 13. Detriangulating: Escaping from the Corners

Once cornered as a P: "I'd rather be glad than mad." Move to clear challenging. The skill is reciprocal "problem solving." [SWOT Matrix is helpful.]

Once cornered as an R: "I'd rather be smarter than a martyr." Move to clear nurturing or mentoring. The skill is "benevolent disinterest."

Once cornered as a V: "I'd rather be getting than fretting." Move to creating, discovering, risking. The skill is contracting for change.

## 14. The Contract for Change

- 14.1. "What do you want to change about yourself and your life that would enable you to live more effectively?"
- 14.2. "How would you have to behave or relate differently to achieve this goal, stated practically, reasonably and measurably?"

- 14.3. "How would you have to adjust the 168 hours of your week to achieve these gains?"
- 14.4. "How will significant others know of your changes?"
- 14.5. "How might you sabotage your change plan?"

**15. Questions for Challengers, Learners and Mentors**

- 15.1. "What are you doing to create your own hell?"
- 15.2. "How can I help you see how active you are in creating / constructing your own problems?"
- 15.3. "What do you keep doing over and over to make things go no place?"
- 15.4. "What are the positive payoffs for things going poorly?"
- 15.5. "What is the request or demand you are making of me with that statement?"
- 15.6. "Do you know what kids want when they blow it?"
- 15.7. What role are you most likely to play when life becomes stressful?
- 15.8. What is the most socially approved role in your ministry culture?
- 15.9. How does what we talked about with PRV relate to ministry burnout?
- 15.10. What 3 changes will you have to make to avoid relating as a PRV?
- 15.11. What roles did your parents play in your growing up years?