

Safety Culture: Effective Communication

This article was written in collaboration with Dr Claire Pekcan, Director at Safe Marine, and further to our [Empowered Communications infographic](#), provides more detailed information on methods of communication.

Communicating effectively is an important part of developing a healthy Safety Culture, improving teamwork and leadership, and empowering people to openly discuss safety issues and solutions.

We use communication every day when we interact with people; however, while it is something we have lots of opportunity to practise, it is a very complicated process and is understandably something that we sometimes get wrong. It may be negatively affected when we are under stress, fatigued or struggling with workload. Even when we recognise our communication is not working effectively, it may be difficult to identify new methods of communication which improve the situation. We can get stuck in the Drama Triangle^[1]. These communication challenges are not unique to the maritime industry and are experienced by people all over the world.

The Drama Triangle is an idea conceived by Stephen Karpman and describes how social interactions can become ineffective because of the three communication styles that people sometimes adopt: Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim. People may move around the triangle, often swapping positions, and could find it difficult to be able to step out of it. This guidance explains the characteristics of the Drama Triangle, providing examples which may assist identify a current situation, and provide alternative methods to help with improving communication.

Ineffective Communication Styles



The Drama Triangle

The first step towards better communication is to recognise when we are representing roles in the Drama Triangle and the ineffective communication styles we sometimes adopt. One way to do this is by listening to the language being used:

No. 1: The Persecutor – “It’s all your fault!”

The Persecutor style can be easy to spot; it can involve shouting, pointing a finger, and blaming others for things going wrong. Some of the typical phrases that might be used include:

- *“I should have known better than to ask you to do it.”*
- *“You never do what I ask you to.”*
- *“If only you had done your job properly, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”*

This communication style may be used to avoid taking responsibility for a problem; the Persecutor needs a Victim to take the blame. The Persecutor may switch to Rescuer if this style does not achieve the result they desire, or switch to Victim with a mentality of “I just can’t get these people to do their job properly”.

No. 2: The Rescuer – “Let me do it!”

The Rescuer style is often recognised by the question why, such as:

- *“Why don’t you let me have a look at the plans?”*

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- *“Why don’t you get someone to help you?”*
 - *“Why don’t you try reading the manual?”*

This communication style appears positive and helpful but has the consequence of keeping the Victim stuck; it fails to help them take responsibility for solving their own problems and the offers of help or suggestions will often be met with “Yes, but I don’t have time” or “Yes, but I’ve tried that already”. Eventually the Victim may get annoyed with the Rescuer and switch to Persecutor – “Why don’t you mind your own business!” – or similarly, the Rescuer might become frustrated with the Victim and switch to Persecutor – “You’re right, you are useless!”

No. 3: The Victim – “Why does this keep happening to me?”

The Victim style is recognised by some common phrases:

- *“It’s beyond my control.”*
- *“I can’t do anything about it.”*
- *“Nobody will help me.”*

This communication style is driven by the person’s belief that their problems are outside of their control and is accompanied by a lack of willingness to take charge of their life. The Victim style is designed to avoid trouble but may unconsciously invite it.

Effective communication styles

If we can recognise ourselves in these Drama Triangle roles, the next step is to opt out of these behaviours altogether and switch to [The Empowerment Dynamic](#)^[ii]. This is an outcome focused set of communication styles, described by David Emerald Womeldorff, where the individual switches to a new method rather than just adopting a new position on the Drama Triangle.



The Empowerment Dynamic

No. 1: Persecutor to Challenger (from blame to assertiveness)

Assertiveness is sometimes confused with aggressiveness, but it is in fact a very different communication style. Rather than shouting at people or blaming them as the Persecutor may, being assertive as the Challenger involves calmly setting boundaries and holding people to account.

This can be recognised by statements that start with “I” rather than “you” and questions rather than opinions:

- *“I am worried that this incident might occur again. Let’s think carefully about our next steps.”*
- *“I don’t believe that’s how this job is normally done. Can you help me understand why you chose to do it that way?”*
- *“I have some priority work to do now. Can we talk about this tomorrow?”*

No. 2: Rescuer to Coach (from dependency to responsibility)

The Rescuer may be motivated to help, but unknowingly makes the other person dependent. By switching to the role of Coach, they do not abandon the other person, but encourage them to think through their problems and find solutions for themselves.

The Coach’s most effective communication tool is [active listening](#), where they listen for what is

not being said rather than leaping in with the answer. This communication style can be identified by probing questions, empathetic responses and encouraging affirmations.

- *“That’s good, you’ve shown them the personal protective equipment policy and explained the potential consequences. What else might you do?”*
- *“OK, so you’re telling me you’ve tried to get them to wear their safety goggles, but they are just refusing to. It’s a tricky problem. Talk me through what you’ve tried to do so far.”*
- *“I will leave you to work through that, but remember I am here if you need any support.”*

No. 3: Victim to Creator (from problem to problem-solving)

The Victim is often motivated by fear; whether that is fear of failure or even fear of success. To be free of this fear an individual needs to choose to become a Creator, which would involve them having an internal conversation to identify the outcomes they desire rather than worrying about the problems they have.

They will ask themselves questions to learn what they need to do solve the problems they face:

- *“What stops me from achieving my goals?”*
- *“What are my strengths and weaknesses?”*
- *“How do I achieve success without the help of others?”*

Avoiding the drama triangle

We may encounter conversations with people who have adopted a position in the Drama Triangle, which may resort in us finding ourselves taking up an alternate role; for example, a Persecutor or a Rescuer may communicate in a way that invites us into the Victim role, or a Victim may attempt to make us their Rescuer or result in us becoming their Persecutor. What techniques can we use when we recognise this is happening without becoming involved in the Drama Triangle?

1. Acknowledging
2. Probing
3. The “broken record” technique
4. Pointing out a consequence

Acknowledging

When someone starts to criticise or blame us, acknowledging involves letting them know that we have heard their comments without their words affecting our emotions.

Them: *"You've done that in completely the wrong way!"*

You: *"You don't like my approach."*

In this scenario, we are not agreeing with the person criticising us, we are simply reflecting what we are hearing. Acknowledging gives the other person reassurance that we are listening and is an invitation for them to explain why they are upset.

Probing

Some people may try to avoid the invitation to explain, so probing is a more direct way of asking them to give further information.

Them: *"No, I don't like your approach. Why can't you learn to do it properly?!"*

You: *"Can you tell me exactly what it is that you don't like about my approach?"*

Probing is an invitation to our antagonist to explain more without getting into an argument with them. They may have a valid concern, and, by probing, we can help uncover what that concern is.

The "broken record" technique^[1]

Another exchange that we may encounter is when the antagonist tries to manipulate us into doing what they want; they are inviting us to rescue them from a problem, often of their own making. In this technique, we decide what our non-negotiable limit is, and we stick to it, not by justifying our decision, but by simply stating this limit repeatedly.

Them: *"Stop what you're doing, I need this report for the office finished before you go on watch."*

You: *"I would if I could, but I don't have the time to do this before my watch."*

Them: *"Look, you may not realise how important this is!"*

You: *"I'm sure it is important, but today I don't have the time before I take over the watch."*

Them: *"I've promised that the report will be ready by close of business. You're not going to make me break a promise, are you?"*

You: *"I'll do whatever I can to help just as long as I take over my watch on time."*

If we begin to justify or argue our case, our antagonist will exploit any weakness in our argument until we agree, so by repeating the point we maintain our position without being drawn into the Drama Triangle.

Pointing out a consequence

This last technique is particularly useful for avoiding an unpleasant dynamic with someone who is not taking responsibility for their actions or not complying with best practices. With this technique, we are letting the other person know what will happen if the situation persists without becoming the Persecutor or the Rescuer.

You: *"I've noticed that you are still arriving late on watch even though we've spoken about this three times in the past month. Why is that?"*

Them: *"Sorry. Cook said he would give me a knock, but he must have forgotten."*

You: *"It is your responsibility to get to the bridge on time, not the cook's. I need you on the bridge on time please."*

Them: *"I'll try."*

You: *"That is what you said on the last two occasions. I need something more concrete from you. If you don't start your watch on time for the next week, I will have to begin disciplinary proceedings. I would prefer not to do that. Will you arrive on the bridge on time, please?"*

This technique requires careful handling so it does not sound like a threat. It is important to maintain a straight facial expression, keep our tone of voice neutral, and be factual and precise. By remaining calm but assertive, we can ensure we remain the Challenger, not the Persecutor.

As with any skill, effective communication takes time to master. By beginning to recognise the ineffective communication styles, we can make the decision to step towards the more efficient Empowerment Dynamic and we can challenge others when we recognise them taking on roles which prevent effective communication. We may naturally slip back to the ineffective styles at times, but regular practice and awareness of the issues allows us to continuously improve, and improving our communication will improve our work, our working relationships and make us more effective in a team.

We welcome all feedback on this or any other Loss Prevention guidance, therefore please feel free to [contact the team](#) should you have any queries on this subject.

[1] The name of the broken record technique refers to vinyl records, when a scratch in the record means it plays the same part of the song over and over again.

[i] Karpman, S. (1968). *Fairy tales and script drama analysis*. Transactional Analysis Bulletin, 7(26), 39-43

[ii] Womeldorff, D., 2021. [The Empowerment Triangle](#). [online] Powerofted.com.