

## From Confrontation to Collaboration: What's the Story? *Better Conversations, April 5, 2005*



You've undoubtedly witnessed (or participated in) conversations such as the following:

**Perry Noid:** "Why aren't those estimates ready for the budget report yet? I told you yesterday that I needed them by 2:00. Thanks to you, I'll be here half the night getting this ready."

**Vic Tom:** "This place doesn't revolve around you, you know. I had customers to tend to. Without them, you wouldn't have a budget to worry about."

**Perry:** "That may be, but you could have at least had the decency to let me know you were going to be late."

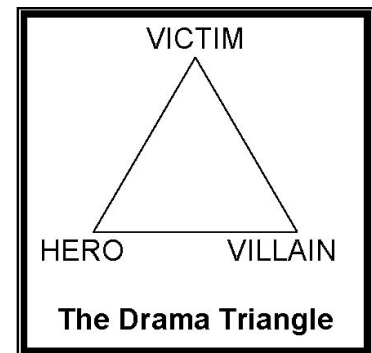
**Vic:** "If you were ever available, I would have told you what was happening."

Hardly constructive, these exchanges resemble debates or ping-pong games and serve only to inflame emotions and entrench the participants. How do normally intelligent and articulate people fall into such unproductive patterns? And what can be done about it? The answers to both questions lie in the roles we instinctively and sometimes unconsciously adopt when confronted by conflict.

In conflict, everyone has a story - or at least their side of the story. To better understand these stories, try prefacing them with the words "Once upon a time." People's conflict stories feature the same three types of characters as do the fairy tales of our youth: the innocent, helpless victim; the evil, controlling villain, and the brave, righteous hero. We encounter these same character types on the front page of our newspapers, in our favourite television shows and on movie screens everywhere.

When we perceive ourselves as attacked or threatened by another, we usually see ourselves as the victim—innocent and powerless. We may quickly shift to playing the hero and stand up to our attacker. And if we don't manage our angry impulses, we may even slip into the role of the villain and personally attack the other person. Each role limits our understanding of situation; together they form a "drama triangle" that traps us in confrontation. This explains why people in conflict refer to feeling "stuck".

In the example above, Perry felt let down (the victim) when he didn't receive the budget figures he needed and blamed Vic (the villain). Conversely, Vic felt unfairly blamed (the victim) when Perry (the villain) criticized him for responding to customer demands. Each saw himself as justified in attempting to right the wrong (the hero) by defending themselves and attacking the other (the villain) in their place. Soon the questions of the budget figures and communication were forgotten in the wake of the ensuing verbal jousting that caused each person to become angrier and more entrenched. This "drama triangle" traps us in confrontation and damages relationships.



Once we become aware of this pattern and our role in it, we can choose more constructive approaches. When we shift our judgement to curiosity, we open ourselves to understand the other person instead of attributing evil motives to them. Curiosity leads us to ask questions, listen, and understand why the other person might feel like a victim in the situation. When the other person feels heard instead of attacked, they become more willing to hear our side of the story – we win ourselves a hearing. We can take advantage of that hearing by asserting our perspective in a way that doesn't label the other person as the villain.

Consider the example above. Instead of discounting Perry's concerns, Vic could have responded "Perry, I get that you're up against it with the budget. And you're right – I didn't get you those estimates yesterday. Something came up for me with a key customer and I had trouble tracking you down to let you know. I'd like to sit down for five minutes, get this back on track and figure out how to handle it better in the future." No victims, no villains – just two people working to solve a problem.

Some people view conflict as negative and destructive, as it well can be. But when we bring genuine curiosity, respect and compassion to our conflict conversations, we build bridges, deepen relationships and solve problems. We move beyond the drama of confrontation to resolution.