Chapter 7
The Empowerment Dynamic Approach to Transformational Self-Directed Lifelong Learning

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ABSTRACT

The dreaded drama triangle is a toxic dysfunction that hinders growth, effectiveness, and productivity among individuals, groups, and organizations. There are three predominant roles in the dreaded drama triangle: victim, persecutor, and rescuer. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the drama triangle roles, explore how the drama triangle roles hinder individual growth and group development, and introduce the empowerment dynamic as an approach that facilitates transformational self-directed lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly changing environment in which we live today, people have generally come to accept that lifelong learning is required in order to advance in the workplace as well as to flourish throughout the lifespan. Lifelong learning has been described by Longworth and Davies (1996) as

the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills, and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances, and environments. (p. 22)

Lifelong learning opportunities occur through formal education, workplace training, and other less formal venues. Ferrari (2016) explains there is a "natural context of daily life within which we are continually learning in informal and non-formal contexts, even in adulthood" (p. 480). Through these learning engagements, people gain new knowledge, skills, and abilities.

What makes learning transformational? Transformation in learning occurs as learners self-evaluate, make sense, create meaning, and change as a result of the experience (Mezirow, 1991). When individuals experience an event that challenges their underlying assumptions and beliefs about the world, they experience unease and will then choose to reject, accept, or question the new point of view (Cranton, 1992; Marrocco, Kazer, & Neal-Boylan, 2014). When faced with a troubling situation or disruptive event, individuals not only engage in self-directed critical reflection but also often reach out and communicate with others as they attempt to internally resolve the issue (Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Yukawa, 2015). Transformational self-directed lifelong learning does not occur simply as a result of having life experiences and resolving cognitive dissonance. In self-directed lifelong learning, the onus is on learners to take personal responsibility and manage themselves through obstacles and challenges encountered on the life journey (Mingsheng, 2016). Learner self-awareness, self-leadership, and self-directedness are used to determine what additional information and resources are necessary. In transformational self-directed lifelong learning, individuals emerge from challenging experiences with new perspectives and strengthened beliefs.

Experiences that challenge beliefs, ideas, and values can create mental stress known as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). In order for the disorienting situation to prove transformational, people need to learn to overcome tendencies to block opportunities for transformational learning. Cooper (2007) explains, "we do not like inconsistency. It upsets us and it drives us to action to reduce our inconsistency" (p. 2). The drive to reduce inconsistency is a powerful inducement to action. One way people relieve the anxiety of cognitive dissonance is through confirmation bias, which is "the tendency of people to focus on evidence that confirms their existing views and to ignore or discount information that may challenge those views" (Cohen, 2015, p. 79). Lahey (2016) points out these actions somewhat "operate unconsciously from a state of fear and take on different drama-based roles as a result" (p. xiii). She explains, "living out of fear not only keeps us small but creates a dynamic in which we keep others small as well. In other words, we limit our own potential as well as the people around us" (Lahey, 2016, p. xiii). Emerald (2016) refers to this situation as the dreaded drama triangle.

The dreaded drama triangle is enacted through dysfunctional roles that people play in families, groups, and organizations when information crosses their sensitive line (Whetten & Cameron, 1993). Carlopio and Andrewartha (2012) explain the sensitive line "refers to the point at which individuals become defensive or protective when encountering information about themselves that is inconsistent with their self-concept" (p. 65). An idea, issue, situation, or experience that challenges underlying assumptions, expectations, or a particular mindset can raise anxiety and create stress (Clapp-Smith & Wernsing, 2014).

In the dreaded drama triangle, there are three predominant anti-learning responses to stressful information or encounters: victim, persecutor, and rescuer. In the dreaded drama triangle, the people experiencing cognitive dissonance, or the disorienting dilemma, see themselves as a victim, and the challenging situation or person who triggers the emotional distress is viewed as the persecutor. Victims then seek out a rescuer to make things right. The drama triangle can be observed within classrooms, dysfunctional families, toxic workplace environments, political arenas, or any context in which there is a victim, persecutor, and rescuer. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the dreaded drama triangle as an anti-learning toxic dysfunction that hinders transformational learning, growth, effectiveness, and productivity among individuals, groups, and organizations. The empowerment dynamic is presented as a method of sidestepping the drama triangle in order to encourage transformational self-directed lifelong learning, which is beneficial in personal growth and learning as well as in development of successful relationships in communities, families, schools, and the workplace.

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