

Recently published in:



Health Care Management  
Alumni Association

# THE WHARTON HEALTHCARE QUARTERLY

The Companies of MPI

**FurstGroup**

Executive Search

[FurstGroup.com](http://FurstGroup.com)

800.642.9940

**NuBrickPartners**

Leadership Consulting

[NuBrickPartners.com](http://NuBrickPartners.com)

800.960.9245



## ESCAPE THE DRAMA TRIANGLE TO ENHANCE YOUR TEAM'S POTENTIAL

As a healthcare executive, you may find yourself leading a talented team of individuals seemingly hindered by reoccurring issues around communication style or work approach that negatively impact outcomes and performance. Is your organization performing harmoniously like a symphony orchestra, creating beautiful music? Or do leaders operate within their lanes like a swim team?

If your workforce lacks harmony, you are not alone. Many successful healthcare organizations face some level of dysfunction, and this causes leaders to question their role in these challenges. The truth is that [stress](#) can often trigger anxiety-driven behaviors that are less productive, leading to trust deficits, employee dissatisfaction, and talent attrition.

This pattern is called the Drama Triangle—and it stifles effective leadership and team development. Most organizations will not be effective with a swim team model at the top. So, if you sense something obstructing your team's cohesion but cannot identify it, check out the guide below to learn more and for a potential breakthrough.

The Companies of MPI

**FurstGroup**  
Executive Search  
[FurstGroup.com](http://FurstGroup.com)  
800.642.9940

**NuBrickPartners**  
Leadership Consulting  
[NuBrickPartners.com](http://NuBrickPartners.com)  
800.960.9245

## What is the Drama Triangle?

The Drama Triangle is a concept furthered by Dr. Stephen Karpman in 1968 that outlines three key roles that surface during conflict: the Victim, the Rescuer, and the Persecutor. Used initially to analyze family dynamics, the Drama Triangle also applies to organizational conflict. Karpman defined the roles as follows:

### The Victim – “Poor me.”

This individual feels powerless and entrapped, attributing their plight to Persecutors. They rely on external aid from Rescuers, diminishing their problem-solving skills and reinforcing their state of helplessness. This behavior inhibits their ability to achieve goals, experience fulfillment, and keeps them stagnant. Their internal monologue might include:

***Why does this always happen to me? If only they would change their ways. I feel used.***

### The Rescuer – “Let me help you.”

Rescuers derive their value from an ability to save others. They are driven to rescue the Victim, often at the expense of their personal needs. The Rescuer’s behavior enables the Victim’s sense of helplessness, disrupting their potential for growth and independence. Their solutions keep the Victim dependent on them, leading to exhaustion, resentment, and overwhelming pressure. By constantly focusing on the needs of others, Rescuers can avoid addressing their own issues. Their internal monologue may echo the following:

***I can resolve this. Let me handle this for you. I am more efficient at this task. You require assistance.***

### The Persecutor – “This is all your fault.”

Consider the Persecutor an overly stringent and authoritative figure, akin to a critical and controlling parent. Carrying a superiority complex, they exacerbate the Victim’s feelings of helplessness through their bullying and judgmental nature. They assign blame to Victims and criticize Rescuers while offering no tangible aid or solutions, only critique. They lead rigidly with an approach marked by inflexibility and an absence of empathy. The internal monologue of a Persecutor might include:

***If they would do [blank], then I would not be burdened. Their thoughts and feelings are irrelevant to me. I possess superior knowledge; what is wrong with them?***

In periods of heightened stress, individuals may assume any of the roles above, resulting in less-than-optimal responses to conflict—shame (Victim), blame (Persecutor), and anxiety (Rescuer). Furthermore, role swapping frequently occurs as a temporary measure to mitigate tension. But without addressing the underlying issues, the drama cycle is likely to recur. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that each character contributes to the creation of the others, perpetuating a cycle that proves challenging to disrupt.

## How to Break the Triangle

The Drama Triangle can lead to stifled innovation, reduced psychological safety, and heightened stress levels—factors that reduce productivity and profitability.

As an executive relational intelligence expert, I have witnessed how a lack of self-awareness can undermine team unity within healthcare settings. However, every challenge presents an opportunity for growth. We can mitigate these behaviors by reshaping leadership norms and cultivating a more supportive work environment. The following three strategies help teams break free from the destructive cycle of the Drama Triangle, thereby fostering workforce cohesion:

### 1. Step Out of the Triangle

We possess the power to modify our viewpoints and actions consciously. A single person’s dedication to authenticity can significantly sway relationships, teams, and the broader organization within a healthcare context.



The Companies of MPI

**FurstGroup**  
Executive Search  
FurstGroup.com  
800.642.9940

**NuBrickPartners**  
Leadership Consulting  
NuBrickPartners.com  
800.960.9245

Assuming complete accountability for one's actions enables a shift from the roles defined by the Drama Triangle to a position of authentic leadership. This transformative change evolves the Drama Triangle into a Power Triangle—an entity grounded in passion and centered on solutions and outcomes rather than fault-finding or stress. This shift is particularly critical in healthcare settings where effective team dynamics directly impact patient outcomes.

## 2. Self-awareness

To break free from [the Drama Triangle](#), you must recognize your role. By developing self-awareness, leaders can identify their Victim, Persecutor, or Rescuer tendencies and opt for a more effective approach. Aspects of self-awareness include:


- **Emotional Awareness** - Understand your emotions and their impact on others.
- **Self-Assessment** - Be aware of your strengths and weaknesses, accept feedback, and stay open to new perspectives for continuous self-improvement.
- **Self-Confidence** - Be confident in your worth and abilities, independent of external validation. Voice your views, even when unpopular, and stand firm in upholding company values.



## 3. Emotional Intelligence

Enhancing emotional intelligence (EQ) enables healthcare executives to effectively comprehend and manage their emotions and those of others during conflict, fostering improved communication and increased empathy. A practical way to boost EQ is by identifying our stress reactions in crises. Even minor conflicts can trigger stress responses known as *fight, flight, or freeze*. In these reactionary moments, we can enter the Drama Triangle and default to old patterns that kept us safe—often in childhood. However, these patterns may not be the best way to interact with our colleagues as adults.

In one of our past webinars, we introduced a tool called [Above the Line/Below the Line](#) that helps leaders practice self-awareness and mindful responses to moments of crisis.

Healthcare leaders can forge a more empowered and productive workplace by comprehending the triangle's patterns and employing strategies to liberate themselves from being caught up. This metamorphosis undoubtedly benefits leaders and enhances the overall success and welfare of their organizations. 



Joe Mazzenga  
Managing Partner  
NuBrick Partners  
Phone: (800) 960-9245  
[jmazzenga@nubrickpartners.com](mailto:jmazzenga@nubrickpartners.com)

The Companies of MPI

**FurstGroup**  
Executive Search  
[FurstGroup.com](http://FurstGroup.com)  
800.642.9940

 **NuBrickPartners**  
Leadership Consulting  
[NuBrickPartners.com](http://NuBrickPartners.com)  
800.960.9245