

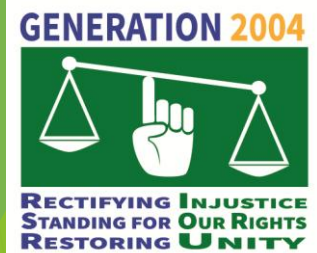
# Psychological Games People Play at Work

Transactional Analysis  
Understanding Hidden Dynamics within Organisations

- Yes... but!
- Kick me!

24 March 2026

Brussels



# Summary

- ▶ Intro in TA - Psychological Games
- ▶ What are the games?
- ▶ Characteristics of games
- ▶ Drama Triangle / Roles / Life positions (recap)
- ▶ Games: Kick me and Yes...but!
- ▶ Why do we play these games?
- ▶ How do we play the games - changing roles
  
- ▶ How do we stop these games?
- ▶ Exercise
- ▶ Conclusions
  
- ▶ Q & A

# Intro - how the games start

## Foggy / unclear Situation at work

A comment  
An irony  
A joke  
...that made you feel  
uncomfortable

You are not sure what  
to think off or what  
to do

What could be the  
correct reaction?

## Little inner voice

Maybe I exaggerate!  
Maybe I am too  
sensitive!  
Maybe it is my  
imagination!

I am not a saint  
either!

I am also making  
mistakes!

Let's not make a big  
drama!

# Characteristics of Games

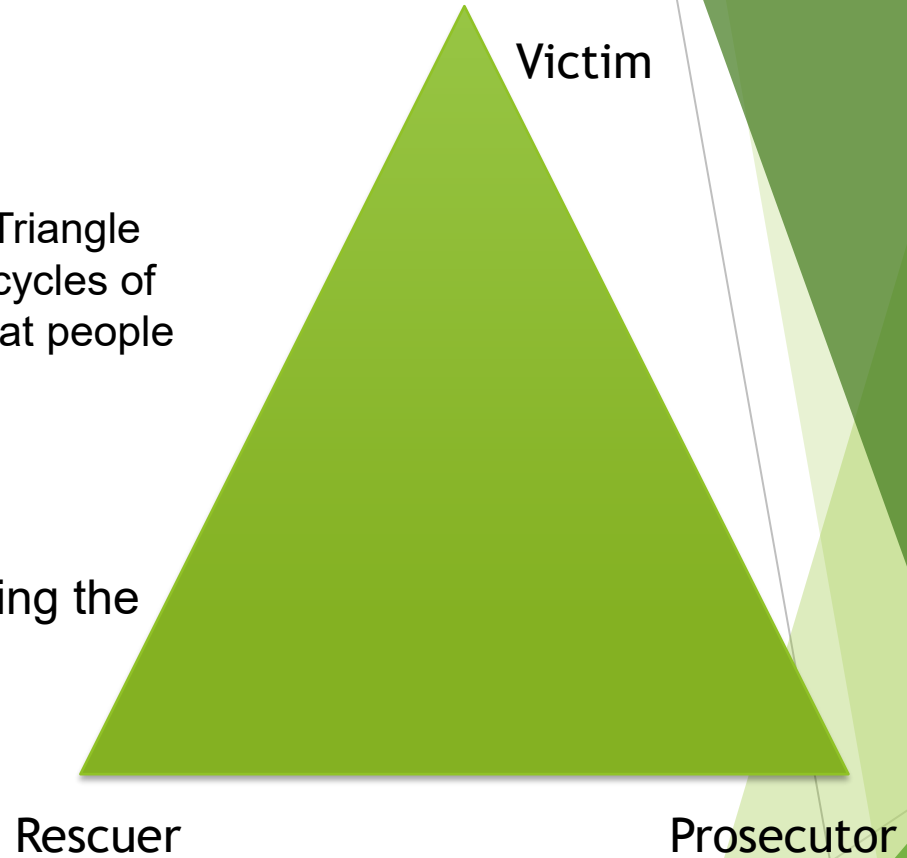
- ▶ They are repetitive interactions between people that start to have a pattern and they tend to repeat with different people and in different circumstances
- ▶ The “games” most of the time start from these unclear situations
- ▶ They start very subtle
- ▶ They are not very aggressive (at the beginning)
  
- ▶ The psychological games are not innocent!
- ▶ They have a hidden part
- ▶ They have a payoff
- ▶ But they are played by people without being 100% conscious

# The Drama Triangle / Roles

Developed by psychiatrist Stephen Karpman in 1968, the Drama Triangle maps out destructive conflict patterns that trap people in endless cycles of blame and dysfunction – which are in fact psychological games that people play.

The fascinating and frustrating reality?

People can switch roles within a single conversation, keeping the drama alive and solutions at bay.



"When we're in the triangle, we're reacting, not responding."

# Role Switching

- ▶ Roles are dynamic and can shift.
  - ▶ The victim may become the prosecutor.
  - ▶ The prosecutor may claim victimhood.
  - ▶ The rescuer may feel attacked and become victim or even the prosecutor.
- ▶ This creates escalation and conflict spirals.

# Life Positions

**YOU ARE OK**

**I'M NOT OK, YOU ARE OK**

« Poor me »  
Helpless  
Passive  
Victim

**I'M OK, YOU ARE OK**

The healthy position  
Happy  
« We can make it »  
Solution oriented

**I AM NOT OK**

**I'M NOT OK, YOU ARE NOT OK**

« Oh, this is terrible, we'll never  
make it »  
Hopeless  
Passive - aggressive  
Homicide/Suicide  
Victim and Persecutor

**I AM OK, YOU ARE NOT OK**

« It's your fault »  
Angry  
Blaming, criticizing  
Aggressive  
Persecutor and Rescuer

**I AM OK**

**YOU ARE NOT OK**

# How does a psychological game become harassment? (1)

- ▶ It is a process and it takes time.
- ▶ It starts with several situations that look like testing: A joke, an ironic remark, an ambiguous comment.
- ▶ The question is simple: Will you react or not?
- ▶ If there is no reaction, the behaviour repeats.
- ▶ This leads to NORMALIZATION:
  - ▶ “That’s just how we are.”
  - ▶ “It’s not a big deal.”
- ▶ Over time, frequency increases, intensity grows, and sometimes others get involved.
- ▶ This is ESCALATION

# How does a psychological game become harassment? (2)

Eventually, we reach FIXATION.

- ▶ At this stage, it is no longer a game.
- ▶ It becomes a relational pattern:
  - stable roles
  - repeated behaviours
  - and, most importantly, a power imbalance

And this leads to a very simple conclusion:

- ▶ Psychological game + repetition + power imbalance = harassment

# Why do we play these games?

- To get attention and emotional recognition (even if it is negative)
- To confirm our life position  
→ “I’m not OK” or “Others are not OK”
- To avoid responsibility or vulnerability (easier to stay in a role than face reality)
- To maintain a sense of control or superiority
- To repeat familiar relational patterns learned in past experiences

## *Underlying dynamic:*

We ignore/discount or distort aspects of

- ▶ → ourselves
- ▶ → others
- ▶ → the situation

...in order to keep the game going.

# KICK ME!

## Anatomy of the game

- Provocation - something socially wrong:
  - ▶ Show up late
  - ▶ Break a rule
  - ▶ Make a clumsy mistake
- The hook - they wait for you to play the Persecutor
- The payoff:
  - ▶ You get angry and « Kick » them, criticize them
  - ▶ They feel they deserve it: « I knew I was no good »/ « I knew everyone is mean to me »

# Yes... but...!

## Anatomy of the game

- Provocation - asking for help but rejecting solutions:
  - ▶ Present a problem repeatedly
  - ▶ Ask for advice or support
  - ▶ Respond with “Yes, but...” to every suggestion
- **The hook** - they invite you to become the Rescuer
  - ▶ You feel responsible to help
  - ▶ You keep offering more and more solutions
- **The payoff:**
  - ▶ You feel frustrated, ineffective, even irritated
  - ▶ you confirm your belief: « Nothing works » / « No one can really help me »

# Degrees of Psychological Games

- 1st Degree - mild
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Degree - more serious, hidden consequences
- 3rd Degree - destructive, harmful, very serious consequences

# How do we exit psychological games?

- ▶ Exiting a game does not mean winning it.
- ▶ It means choosing not to play it anymore.
- ▶ In Transactional Analysis, this means moving out of the Drama Triangle and stepping into a healthy position:

I'm OK - You're OK

- ▶ From this position:
  - **The Victim becomes responsible**  
→ What are my options? What is one small step I can take?
  - **The Rescuer stops fixing others**  
→ What have you tried so far? How can I support you?
  - **The Persecutor becomes assertive**  
→ I felt frustrated when the deadline was not respected

# Exercise:

- ▶ Think about a recent situation at work where there was tension. No need to share it, just reflect.
- 👉 Which role did you take? Victim, Persecutor, or Rescuer?
- ▶ Now ask yourself: If you were in an “I’m OK - You’re OK” position, what would you have done differently?
- ▶ Imagine this: A colleague comes to you with a problem, but rejects every solution you offer.
- 👉 Instead of continuing to give advice, what could you do differently?
- ▶ A small shift in response is often the way out of the game!

# Conclusions

- ▶ Psychological games are not harmless.
- ▶ They are the invisible infrastructure of harassment.
- ▶ They create ambiguity.
- ▶ Ambiguity allows denial.
- ▶ Denial allows repetition.
- ▶ And repetition creates harassment.
  
- ▶ Perhaps the most important question is not: Who is right?
  
- ▶ But rather: What relational pattern are we in... and do we continue to want to stay there?

