Self-directed learning: managing yourself and your working relationships

IDEAS FROM TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS

In this chapter I’d like to explore a number of ideas from Transactional Analysis that can help you to manage yourself and your relationships with other people. TA - as it is often called - is a psychological theory that seeks to explain how individuals think, feel, behave and interact with others, often in patterns that are repeated through life. It is a way of understanding what happens within and between people. TA is fundamentally a psychoanalytic approach which assumes that our early childhood experiences profoundly shape – generally unconsciously – how we live our lives. However, it is possible to use ideas from TA at a cognitive level. The models set out below may increase your awareness as you view things and make sense of your situation from a new perspective. And, when you begin to think differently about your situation you may then go on to respond or act differently. In this way TA can also be regarded as a cognitive-behavioural approach which can help you to think and behave more effectively.

The first model that we shall look at is the notion of Parent, Adult and Child ego states. I reckon that I sketch this model with a coaching client perhaps once a week. In my experience, clients not only find it easy to understand but also – and more importantly – find that it offers a useful way of looking at how they are interacting with other people.

Ego states

We develop our personality as we go through life, but much of it is shaped by our experiences in early childhood. Some aspects – our Child ego state – are like replays of how we ourselves behaved as young children seeking the love or approval of powerful figures in our lives, such as parents, older siblings or teachers. Other aspects of our personality – our Parent ego state - are based on feelings, attitudes and behaviours that we copied – or swallowed whole, as it were - from our parents or other authority figures. As we grow up we also integrate our experiences of healthy, co-operative relationships and of times when we coped well with difficulties – these emotional memories form our Adult ego state. Each of us spends time in and switch between these three psychological states – Parent, Adult and Child.

The Child and Parent ego states are subdivided in Transactional Analysis. When you were a young child you often had to adapt to the demands of your parents or carers. You may have learnt to be polite to others, or to be quiet when your mother or father was in a certain mood. You may have learnt that certain emotions were acceptable, but that it wasn’t alright to show anger or to cry. Later in life, when you are acting on the basis of these historic and often by now unconscious memories, you are in your Adapted Child ego state.

However, when you were three or four years old you also spent time laughing, splashing water, playing with paint or glue or sand, and running around. When you are older you might somehow revert to these times, and you are then in your Free Child ego state.
Self-directed learning: managing yourself and your working relationships

If you find yourself in a conversation wagging your finger at the other person, speaking in a harsh tone, pointing out what they have done wrong and telling them how they should have behaved, then almost certainly you are in a Critical Parent ego state. This illustrates how when someone is in a particular ego state their thoughts, feelings, words and body language are generally consistent with one another.

However, when you were a young child your parents also looked after you and ensured that you were safe and well. Perhaps they took your hand and explained that it was important to wait for the green man to appear on the traffic signal before crossing the road. When you find yourself years later looking to protect and look after one of your colleagues, then you may well have gone into a Nurturing Parent ego state. One thing that both Critical Parent and Nurturing Parent ego states have in common is that both are about controlling the other person.

The Adult ego state is not usually subdivided within TA. Hence, there are five possible ego states – Critical Parent, Nurturing Parent, Adapted Child, Free Child and Adult – represented in Figure 4.1.

**Figure 4.1  Ego states**

Being in an Adult ego state - focused on the here and now, looking to collaborate with others and to solve problems, thinking logically and aware of your own and other people’s emotions – is generally a very resourceful state to operate from. However, there are times when it is valuable to be in one of the other ego states, and each of these can be divided further into positive or negative behaviours. So, for example:
Self-directed learning: managing yourself and your working relationships

- good table manners reflect a positive aspect of Adapted Child, while sulking is a negative manifestation
- being in Free Child is very useful at a party or when brainstorming creative ideas, but is inappropriate when driving on a motorway
- pointing out to someone that their behaviour is dangerous might reflect a positive version of Critical Parent, but losing your temper when a colleague makes a small mistake is negative
- offering to help a hard-pressed colleague is positive, whereas not letting your seventeen year old daughter stay out after ten o’clock may be a smothering and negative version of Nurturing Parent

Transactions

So far, in considering ego states, we have been concerned with the processes within an individual person. Transactional Analysis – as the name implies – is concerned with the communications or transactions between people and the relationships thereby created. When I say something to you and you reply, this is a transaction. Transactions – a stimulus plus a response - are the building blocks of communication.

One of the things which can happen in relationships is that we establish typical ways of interacting with one another. For example, a manager with a very directive, command and control style of managing will frequently be operating from a Critical Parent ego state. This may well engender Adapted Child responses from those who work for them. The typical pattern of interaction between this manager and a subordinate is Critical Parent – Adapted Child. (Note that even the word subordinate – rather than, for example, team member or colleague - in the last sentence suggests a certain type of relationship.)

Figure 4.2  Transactions

![Transactions Diagram]
Self-directed learning: managing yourself and your working relationships

In *Turning to One Another* Meg Wheatley writes that, "Those who act superior can’t help but treat others as objects to accomplish their causes and plans." If this way of interacting becomes the norm, then the culture becomes one characterised by Parent – Child behaviour. This can be quite effective – it is the basis of traditional military discipline, for instance. And it may suit all parties. It gives superiors a sense of power, control, status and prestige. It offers subordinates a sense that their role is to follow orders or instructions, which can be quite comfortable. However, it means that the team isn’t drawing on many of the ideas and resources of its members, and they in turn may be feeling less motivated and gaining less job satisfaction.

Generally an Adult - Adult relationship is more likely to be healthy and productive. To engage in an Adult – Adult conversation, you need to be straight in your communication and regard the other person as your equal simply because they are another human being (even though you may be more senior, experienced or talented). This is the basis of assertive communication.

The key to breaking a pattern of unhelpful Parent - Child transactions is to consistently communicate from an Adult ego state and to continually invite the other party to operate from their Adult. Note that there is no guarantee that the other party will respond from Adult – all you can do is to remain in Adult yourself and keep inviting an Adult response. Changing such an established pattern of interactions may well be difficult, not least because it requires the other party to change their behaviour too.

So, for example, you may realise that in your interactions with your manager you are coming from an Adapted Child ego state in response to their Critical Parent. With this awareness, you may attempt to remain in Adult whenever you meet your manager, inviting an Adult response. Alternatively, you might be a manager becoming frustrated by the seeming inability or unwillingness of one of your team to take appropriate responsibility. Their Adapted Child behaviour is hooking your Critical Parent. You might seek then to remain in Adult, continually inviting them to take more responsibility and operate from their own Adult ego state.

Another situation where the idea of ego states is very helpful is in situations where someone is behaving passively when they would prefer to be assertive. Seeking to create Adult – Adult transactions is a useful way of behaving assertively. We shall look at this in more detail in the next chapter.

**Scripts, positions and drivers**

Another idea from Transactional Analysis is the notion of *life script*. Eric Berne, the founder of TA, maintained that each of us early in childhood decides upon a plan for our life, our life script. This is influenced by our parents and our early environment, but it is also a decision that each of us makes. The decisions we make in early childhood are not through the kind of deliberate thinking that we might use later in life. Rather, they are emotional decisions we make in response to external pressures as a way of surviving and having our needs met in a world that is often perceived by an infant as hostile.
Self-directed learning: managing yourself and your working relationships

These early childhood experiences and decisions mean that we end up following a life script such as:

- I Mustn’t Be Me (which might manifest itself in feelings of inferiority)
- I Mustn’t Be a Child (which might inhibit someone from being playful, having fun or behaving spontaneously)
- I Mustn’t Do Anything (which might lead to over-cautiousness and inability to make decisions)

Note that the life script planned by the individual as an infant is not necessarily the same as their life story. What actually happens will be affected by decisions the individual makes as an adult, including decisions for change that they may make through coaching or counselling. As the examples indicate, to explore a life script in depth may mean working at a psychodynamic level with someone who is trained and competent to work in this way.

An idea that arises from life scripts is the notion of **life positions**. There are four life positions which are based on how a person sees the essential value in themself and in others:

- **I’m OK, you’re OK**. This is a healthy position, where the person feels good about themself and others, seeks to collaborate and finds it comfortable to behave assertively.
- **I’m not OK, you’re OK**. This is a depressive position where the person feels one down on others and tends to behave passively.
- **I’m OK, you’re not OK**. This is a defensive position where the person feels one up on others but behaves aggressively, competitively or insensitively to justify their stance.
- **I’m not OK, you’re not OK**. This is a futile position where the person considers that neither themself nor others are any good and often feels hopeless and helpless.

At a less intense level than exploring your life script – at a cognitive level – you can consider and address an issue such as perfectionism in terms of having a **driver** to Be Perfect, a habitual way of behaving that has been shaped by your upbringing or childhood experiences. Five common drivers are:

- Be perfect
- Be strong
- Try hard
- Please others
- Hurry up

If you become aware that your working style is based on one of these drivers, you then have greater choice over how to behave. You can utilise the strengths of your driver when this is appropriate, and you can choose to respond differently when it isn’t – in other words, you needn’t be ruled by your driver.
Games and the drama triangle

Another useful concept in Transactional Analysis is the idea that people play games. A game is a repetitive pattern of transactions between people where something is happening out of awareness at a psychological level that is different from what is taking place at a surface level and which leads to some kind of outcome or pay off, generally but not always in the form of negative feelings or attitudes. In playing a (psychological) game we are following outdated strategies that we used as children to get what we needed. Game playing is one way of manifesting and reinforcing a life script.

TA writers often give catchy names to games. For example, in a game called *If It Weren’t For You*, a mother tells her children repeatedly how she’d long to travel overseas but can’t because she has to look after them. However, even when her children are grown up she still finds reasons not to make those foreign trips. Or, in a common game called *Yes, But*, the player repeatedly seeks advice but always finds reasons not to accept it. Such a player might interact with a partner who themself is playing the game of *Why Don’t You?* in which they continually make suggestions that are rejected.

Stephen Karpman devised a framework for analysing games, the **drama triangle**. The three roles in the drama triangle are Persecutor, Victim and Rescuer. The **Persecutor** puts others down, and is coming from a life position of *I’m OK, you’re not OK*. The **Victim** sees themself as one down, and is coming from *I’m not OK, you’re OK*. The **Rescuer** also sees the Victim as one down but responds by offering help.

When people play games they are in one of these three inauthentic roles, using old strategies in Parent or Child ego states rather than responding in the here and now from an Adult ego state.

*Figure 4.3  The drama triangle*

In the drama triangle, the Victim may seek out a Persecutor to put them down or a Rescuer to confirm their belief that they can’t cope on their own. The drama triangle often involves a switch in roles as it is played out. For example, imagine a situation...
Self-directed learning: managing yourself and your working relationships

where a woman (the Victim) is married to a husband (the Persecutor) who abuses her, either physically or emotionally. For a while she copes with this by endlessly complaining to a friend (the Rescuer) who spends hours listening and offering suggestions that are never taken up. There are various ways in which a switch might occur. The woman might start an affair with another man, moving from Victim to Persecutor while her husband now becomes the Victim. Or her friend might lose her patience and her temper one day, switching from Rescuer to Persecutor.

One way of dealing with game playing is to step out of the drama triangle and respond authentically from an Adult ego state or from one of the positive versions of the other ego states. The winner's triangle is an alternative to the drama triangle which recognises that people may genuinely be vulnerable, that others really do have power or potency, and that helpers can act responsibly to support others.

Figure 4.4  The winner’s triangle

POTENT

RESPONSIBLE

VULNERABLE

In their chapter in *The Complete Handbook of Coaching* Trudi Newton and Rosemary Napper write that

The clue to moving from game playing to authenticity is to recognize the truth behind the game roles; people do have real problems for which they have not yet learned the strategies to solve; people are genuinely and appropriately concerned about others welfare and can offer support without taking over; and people can be assertive about what they can and cannot do without ‘pushing’ or blaming others.