

RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES WITH THE EMPOWERMENT DYNAMIC

By David Emerald

A good friend has been dealing with the heartbreak and challenge of a teenage child entering a drug treatment program. One of the important components of the program is a "bottom line letter" from parents to the child about the expectations, boundaries and agreements necessary once the teen returns home.

She and I were talking about the letter and realized how easy it would be for someone to write something like that while focused on what they *don't want*: not using or drinking (of course); not hanging out with the same former set of friends; not getting into addition trouble, etc. This approach is problem-centered and is rooted in a victim orientation of the Drama Triangle.

The Drama Triangle roles of victim, persecutor and rescuer were first described by Dr. Steven Karpman and are now commonly used in psychology and psychotherapy today. Realizing "The Game" being played and cyclical reactions between these roles, is a major step in developing more positive and productive relationships.

The Empowerment Dynamic, referred to as TED*, offers antidote roles of Creator, Challenger and Coach. Where a victim focuses on problems; a creator looks toward outcomes. Where a persecutor will focus on causes of a problem; a challenger looks for steps toward a desired outcome. Where rescuers insert themselves in order to alleviate a problem; a coach will empower an individual to seek out lasting outcome-oriented actions themselves.

It is much more empowering - and the way of a creator - to put your focus on what you *do want*. The bottom line letter, instead, could set forth a vision of the outcomes the parents want to create with their child, such as "The bottom line is that we want to create with you a healthy, sober lifestyle that is fulfilling and vibrant to you." Such a statement is outcome-centered and is rooted in a creator orientation.



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OF TED*

Once the vision of the outcome is expressed, Creative Tension can be applied to assess current reality and the baby steps to move forward. The baby steps can include consequences for commitments not fulfilled, slip-ups, or relapse. Assessing current reality involves identifying factors that support realizing the vision, and those that *inhibit* forward progress. Supporting actions, in this example, could include attending 12-Step recovery meetings; working with a sponsor or mentor; and setting and following a routine schedule. Inhibiting factors might include social pressures; coming back to familiar surroundings; not eating well or getting enough sleep. Baby steps might then involve a 30-day plan that includes milestones and, in this case, random drug testing.

Let's consider a workplace scenario: an employee is not meeting performance expectations. The starting place for the manager would be to review the job description - or at least the expectations - for anyone in the particular position of the employee.

After focusing on the desired outcome (the job description), the next step would be to assess - ideally with employee input - the current performance of the employee. First, a listing of what the employee is doing that is consistent (i.e. supports) the expectations and second to identify what they are doing or not doing that does not meet the expectations (i.e. inhibits) of the position. A plan of action (i.e. baby steps) would then be developed for the employee to bring their performance up to expectations.

On both personal and professional settings, there may be times in which you must "reframe" a problem you face into an outcome you want to create. Several years ago, we were working with a group of community leaders in a major metropolitan area of California. Participants were asked to bring one leadership challenge that they were facing to the workshop. For a demonstration of the process of problem-reframing, a member of the community's school board volunteered to share their challenge, which was the deeply felt need to reduce the district's high dropout rate. The group could see in her body posture and tone-of-voice the gravity of the problem when she talked about what she didn't want----kids dropping out of school.

She was asked to set aside the problem for a moment and to get in touch with her highest aspiration for the school district. In a matter of a few short minutes, she enthusiastically envisioned "a school district that engages students who see school as relevant and that supports them in preparing for life and/or going on

to college." Her body posture was relaxed and erect, her voice strong and clear. It was obvious that she passionately connected to her vision and what she did want.

Next she was asked about actions - first about what the school board was currently doing to reduce the dropout rate and then about a possible baby step toward her vision. To reduce the dropout rate, she reported, the district had stepped up a "capture and return" strategy, hiring truant officers, working the police department, and asking employers to encourage dropout employees to return to school. When asked about what action the school board could take toward her vision, she was quick to respond, "The first thing I would do is organize a series of focus groups with students to get their input on what would engage them and have them see school as relevant to their lives."

As her responses indicate, the actions we take in reaction to problems are often vastly different than baby steps in service to creating outcomes. When facing challenging situations - personally or professionally – take the following steps:

1. Clarify the outcome you want to create.
2. Reframe the problem (what you *don't want*) into an outcome (what you *do want*), if necessary.
3. Assess current reality - both aspects that support the outcome and those factors that inhibit its creation.
4. Identify and commit to baby steps in service to creating the outcome.

As you shift your focus to what you do want and take the steps outlined above, you will take much more empowered action in creating your envisioned outcomes.