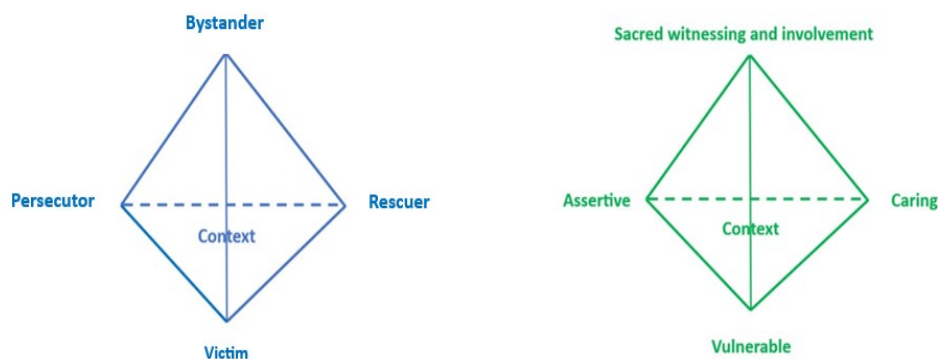




Shifting from Jackal to Giraffe Zone



Shifting from Jackal Zone to Giraffe Zone – Anisha Pandya (2022)

Keep quiet. Fight or Flight. Forget. Repeat. These words capture the pattern that I was beginning to notice in a group.

Robert: I proposed that we begin with a check-in so that every member's voice gets heard.

Meera: I am getting increasingly restless with this check-in process. It has been 45 minutes since we started and we are still checking in. I find this a total waste of time. The check-in seems like a structured activity and I thought ACG groups are supposed to be unstructured. Some members nodded in agreement.

Robert: Meera, that is selfish. You can speak your mind but others might benefit from check-ins.

Will: I disagree with you Robert. I have noticed that the quieter members check in with one or two words and the talkative members end up taking up a lot of space during check-ins.

Robert: I am getting irritated with you Will. You are sharing a bullshit observation to prove your point. You are a hypocrite – when I suggested this idea of check-ins, you were the first one to agree. You keep changing your mind and I am having some real difficulty trusting you

Edward: Robert, I am so angry with you right now. I don't like the way you are talking to Meera and Will – you are using a lot of judgmental language.

Robert: Your statement that I am using judgmental language is a judgment by itself.

Edward: You are so defensive Robert – it is almost impossible to have a conversation with you

Robert: Have you considered that you are very critical of me and you always attack me?

Facilitator: What is going on in the group right now? I see the conflict between Edward and Robert and I am wondering what is happening to Meera and Will.

Tom: Actually, I want to say that I am also in agreement with Edward. Robert, you need to change your ways.

Ashley: Hey friends, let's not get into villainizing Robert. I think he has a positive intention of wanting to include everyone.

As the conflict between Robert and Edward escalated, some of the group members got into taking sides. Even when the facilitator drew attention to Meera and Will, others drew the attention back to Robert. Throughout the session, Mika was silent but nobody invited her into the dialogue. The session ended with tension.

However, in the following session, the group members started talking about a completely different issue and behaved as if nothing had happened in the previous session. Two sessions later, I saw the group falling in the same pattern - there was a conflict about what is 'here and now' and the wild rumpus between Robert and Edward started all over again. It appeared that the group was experiencing a joint brain fog and we remained stuck in our pattern. I wondered if the group was unconsciously operating from the domination mindset, centering whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality.

This case study is a classic example of the jackal zone. When groups get stuck in this zone, they may blame themselves or others and indulge in right vs. wrong thinking. They either discount themselves, others, or the situation. Their behaviour slips into passivity and the problem escalates and remains unresolved.

Sometimes facilitators judge people for taking on the roles of Karpman's Drama Triangle.

Persecutor: Robert's angry outbursts, talking at length, and passing judgments may be perceived as aggressive behavior

Victim: Will's silence despite Robert's harsh comments, the dropping of his shoulders, and a sad expression on his face may be construed as sulking.

Rescuer: Edward's stepping in and fighting on behalf of people of color, and his demand that Robert changes his behavior may be seen as rescuing.

In addition to the classic roles defined by Karpman, often people take on the **bystander** role. These members chose not to engage and passively witness what was going on in the group.

Karpman said that all the parties involved in the conflict unconsciously play all the roles in the drama triangle. For example, while Robert seemed to be in the persecutor role, parts of him had a sense of being victimized because of the lack of curiosity towards his stance, and parts of him were also trying to rescue the quieter participants.

In contrast to the jackal zone, when we are in the giraffe zone, we have a desire to meet people beyond their words and uphold the dignity of all parties involved. We demonstrate curiosity towards everyone as we recognize that all the roles in the drama triangle are tragic attempts to meet needs. We trust the positive intention of all involved and at the same time, we hold people accountable for their impact.

When we shift to the giraffe zone, our attention tends to go in the direction where there is 'loudest' pain. For example, each of the different group members attended to either Robert or Edward, both white men. No attention came towards Meera, Will, or Mika, all people of color. If we want to contribute to social change with NVC consciousness, we need to recognize the fine line between empathizing and indulging people in power. Empathizing entails seeing people beyond their words and social identities (race, class, gender, nationality, socioeconomic status, sexuality, etc) and acknowledging their feelings, needs, and humanity. However, indulging focuses on their suffering without sensitizing them to the impact of their behavior.

We sometimes get so stuck on using clear observations that we miss the process. In this case study, if we only look at the content and clear observations, it may seem like a disagreement between participants over issues such as whether to check in or not, or what is here and now. Our focus may be on resolving the issue at hand, which may appear to be around decision-making and norms. However, it is only when we look at the historical and political context in which the different participants are operating that we can become aware of the underlying systemic processes. Overlooking context in social change efforts can result in ineffective solutions, unintended harm, missed opportunities, and a lack of sustainable impact. The role of context in social change significantly shapes the conditions, challenges, and opportunities for transformative actions.

The transition from the jackal zone to the giraffe zone calls for a pause to observe self and others as we transform judgment into curiosity. In that pause, we can sensitize ourselves to the context of our participants by reflecting on a few questions:

- Who am I paying attention to and why?
- Whose voice is heard most?
- Whose voice is silenced or ignored?

- Whose needs are prioritized?
- Who am I expecting to do the emotional labor?
- Who am I giving empathy to first?
- Who sets norms?
- Whose leadership does the group seem to accept?
- Whose leadership does the group seem to resist or reject?
- How are past injustices or privileges impacting present-day interactions?
- How does intersectionality impact the experiences in the group?
- Whose perspectives are overlooked?

Let's see what happens next in the group...

When the same pattern was repeated, I found myself feeling angry. Parts of me wanted to give Robert a piece of my mind, but I saw myself projecting some enemy images onto him. As I was observing my internal thoughts, I took a deep breath and was reminded of **Step Zero in NVC**, which is to become aware of my intention and to see if my intention holds care for all the parties involved. I slowed down to hold Robert's humanity alongside my values of fairness and desire to contribute to the group. Step Zero is such a crucial juncture because it enables the transition from the jackal to the giraffe zone.

I intervened by saying, "I want to invite the group to pause for a moment. I am guessing that many of us are triggered right now and I want to encourage us to take a meta-perspective, think about our feelings, and look at what is going on in the group."

To facilitate any change in the world, in **Step One** we invite the group to slow down to look at the group process. After a pause, I shared, "I am noticing a pattern emerge in this group—when Robert expressed anger towards Will, Meera, or Mika, the rest of the group either got into fighting with Robert, assuaging him, empathizing with him, or kept quiet. But nobody seems to go towards either Will, Meera, or Mika. Even if I reach out to them, the group tends to take the attention back to Robert. I don't think this process is serving Robert either—he seems upset and hurt. Nor do I see this process serving anyone else. I am wondering if any unconscious systemic issue is getting played out in the group."

Robert: Anisha, I am feeling blamed by you right now, like I am hogging all the attention. I don't think that is an accurate representation of...

Anisha: Robert, I am interrupting you as I am afraid we will repeat our pattern of centering you. I have zero doubt in your goodness and I am not attributing any malice to you Robert. I am neither blaming you nor the group for centering you. Centering people from the dominant culture is a systemic issue that we have all learned as a survival skill. We can unlearn this together. Can we do something different now, Robert? (Robert smiled and nodded in agreement). I ask you to please engage in some self-soothing for a while because I want to create space for

others in the room. Meera, Will, and Mika, would you be willing to share what is going on for you?

As a facilitator, we sometimes need to step in and redirect the conversation so that suppressed voices get a chance to speak up. In **Step Two**, we encourage the group members (haves) to regulate their feelings and become sacred witnesses to what is happening for the have-nots of the group.

Meera: I have been feeling very frustrated and I appreciate your intervention right now. I confess that parts of me have been contemplating whether I want to be in this group.

Will: I can resonate with your frustration Meera. I have this sense that my voice doesn't matter in this space and I have been feeling stifled. I sometimes have this sense that to belong in this group, I have to become subservient to Robert and agree with everything he says or does. Honestly, I am not willing to do that anymore. I am fed up with white men bulldozing me and shutting down my voice. I want to be treated as an equal.

Mika: You are speaking my heart out Will. I refuse to be an assistant or follower of anyone just because they are white. I want to create spaces of shared power.

Anisha: I urge the group members to refrain from sharing their feelings and thoughts at this moment. Is it possible for any of you to recap what Meera, Will, and Mika are saying?

This was **Step Three**, pulling the participants by their giraffe ears so that they hear each other with non-defensiveness and empathy.

Edward: I am hearing how frustrating and maybe even isolating it has been for each one of you to be in this group - would you like more spaciousness in this room to be yourself and let your voice be heard? I also heard your desire to protect your autonomy and the longing for shared power. Am I getting you?

All the other members expressed their empathy towards Will, Mika, and Meera and also expressed regret for how each one of them was contributing to the culture of centering whiteness. To the group's surprise, Robert admitted, "My heart reaches out to you Meera, Will, and Mika - I am receiving your hurt, frustration, and anger too. As I heard you, I recognized that I have been getting into unnecessary conflicts because parts of me are threatened by you all. You come across as very bright and powerful to me and I have been afraid that I can't be a leader in your presence. I seemed to be operating from white entitlement. I am ashamed about my behavior and I am committed to not repeating this. This session has been highly educational for me."

Here are a few other ideas to help participants shift from the Jackal to the Giraffe zone:

- Empathize with the person who may experience themselves as being **victimized** and ask them if they need support.
- Acknowledge the person who may be **rescuing** and encourage them to examine if their behavior is helping the situation
- Make empathic guesses about the feelings and needs of the person in the **persecutor** role. Build just enough connection and then draw attention to the unconscious power dynamics in the room.
- Encourage everyone to look at ways in which everyone's needs can be met.
- Stimulate a discussion on what changes need to be made to promote equity and justice.
- Check with others how they experience you and open yourself to receiving feedback and engaging in a dialogue.

If you experience yourself in any of Karpman's drama triangle roles, here are a few suggestions:

- **Shifting from persecutor to assertive:**
 - Get in touch with your regret about the impact of your behavior and express your mourning
 - Share your longings and make specific requests
- **Shifting from rescuer to caring:**
 - Get in touch with your longing - what do you need recognition for?
 - Ask what the other person needs so that they feel supported?
- **Shifting from victim to vulnerable:**
 - Unpack your helplessness, identify your feelings and needs
 - Acknowledge any self-discounting and look at your options
 - Make clear requests for any support that you may need

Exercise:

1. Think of a situation where you witnessed some kind of abuse, violence or injustice. Who was there? What happened? What did you do? What did others do? Share your observations.
2. What were your feelings as you witnessed the situation?
3. What needs were you trying to meet through your action/inaction?
4. What other needs were unmet for you and others through that action?
5. What can you do to help yourself and others shift from the jackal to the giraffe zone?