

Transactional Analysis & conflict resolution: Strokes, Part 2 of a brief guide



TA can be a useful framework to consider when looking at communication issues in the workplace; particularly in respect of conflict resolution. **David Ryves** offers the second part of a brief guide to the basics.

In my last article, I covered the three ego states that are at the heart of TA: Parent, Adult and Child and how crossed transactions can result in conflict. In this piece, we will explore '**strokes**', both positive and negative as well as the impact of 'no stroke at all'.

Berne defined a **stroke** as the "fundamental unit of social action." A stroke is a unit of recognition, when one person recognizes another person either verbally or non-verbally. Berne introduced the idea of strokes into Transactional Analysis based upon the work of Rene Spitz, a researcher who undertook pioneering work in the area of child development. Spitz observed that infants deprived of handling – in other words, not receiving any strokes – were more prone to emotional and physical difficulties. These infants lacked the cuddling, touching, and handling that most other infants received.

Berne suggested that whilst adults need physical contact, just like infants, they have learned to substitute other types of recognition instead of physical stimulation. So while an infant needs cuddling, an adult can make do with a smile, a wink, a hand gesture, or other form of recognition. Berne used the term **recognition-hunger** to define an adult's need to receive recognition and acknowledgement in the form of strokes.

Strokes can be either positive or negative. A simple example of a negative stroke would be when you arrive at work in the morning and give a cheery 'Good Morning' to a work colleague. You would naturally hope for an equally cheery "Good morning!" in return, perhaps delivered with a smile. However, your colleague may simply frown at you and say nothing, thereby delivering a negative stroke. As bad as this might be, you have at least elicited a response in the form of the frown, albeit a negative one. Had your colleague completely ignored you, giving no response at all, you are likely to feel even worse than you would have had you received a negative stroke. Your recognition-hunger will have been unsatisfied. I have mentioned in another article that the first inclination a person often has that he or she is about to be fired is when his or her boss stops talking to him or her or even acknowledging his or her existence.

Positive strokes are strokes that leave the recipient feeling good and create a positive response while negative strokes are those that are likely to be painful for the recipient, who is left feeling hurt or perhaps angry.

As well as there being positive and negative strokes, each of these can be classified as being either unconditional or conditional. An unconditional stroke is simply about *who* the other person is in your eyes: "I like you" (positive) or "I've never liked you, go away!" (negative). A conditional stroke is one based upon what somebody *does* or has done: "Well done on putting together this great report!" This would be a positive stroke based upon what the person has done. The implication is that the receipt of future similar positive strokes will be conditional upon the delivery of further 'great reports'. A negative conditional stroke could be "You were very rude to Jean in the meeting this morning, behave like that again and I won't put you forward for that special project you're after". This would equate to a mother telling her child "If you don't behave properly, Mummy won't

love you any more". This touches upon the associated need for *unconditional positive regard* which is a core condition, particularly in a positive boss -> subordinate transaction.

Different strokes for different folk

In early life a person may experience predominantly positive or predominantly negative strokes; be these from our parents, siblings, childhood peer-group or teachers. These are stroke patterns to which we become accustomed and feel comfortable and familiar with. An assumption made in TA, is that people seek to recreate the 'stroke balance' experienced in early life during their adulthood. This explains why some individuals set themselves up for difficulties by inviting negative strokes. This is similar to the attention seeking child who, craving attention, 'plays up' in order to receive the stimulus of a negative stroke, despite its consequences, to make up for a deficit in his or her stroke reservoir. A stroke reservoir is a credit balance which, when depleted, causes discomfort and creates a need to regain the old but familiar stroke balance.

Many will assume that their own preferred stroke patterns will also apply to others. Unfortunately, this is often a false assumption. I recall a Chief Executive telling me that he found giving someone praise for good work an uncomfortable and even embarrassing experience, because he himself found being praised uncomfortable and embarrassing. He told me that he could not recall ever having been praised for anything by his father, a feature of his childhood that had become embedded as part of his accustomed stroke pattern. It is therefore important for us to be mindful that others may have different mind-sets and triggers to our own.

Mixed Transactions/Strokes

Strokes can be 'mixed' and contain both positive and negative components. The negative component will always be the one of greatest import. It is more often than not prefixed with the word "but", as in: "That's an interesting idea but you haven't thought it through properly!"

The giving of 'qualified praise', for example, is one that features regularly in the way inept and insecure managers communicate: "This report you put together is actually very good, I really didn't think you'd be up to it. In fact I couldn't have done it all that much better myself!" What starts off being a positive stroke ends up being a negative stroke by a) inferring a lack of confidence in the subordinate's competence and b) carrying a reminder that the boss considers him/herself to still be more capable than the subordinate. How much more of a positive impact could have been achieved by simply saying: "This report you put together is very good indeed, well done!"? It is all too easy to negate the positive impact of a positive stroke by countering it with a negative and qualifying stroke.

Ritual Transactions/Strokes & Scripts

These are typified by the example given earlier in this article. They are ritualised and therefore expected transactions that impart little or no information and therefore have little positive value:

"Good morning!"
"Good morning, and how are you today?"
"Oh, I'm fine thanks, and you?"
"I'm OK thanks, just as busy as ever."
"OK, have a good day then ..."

Although trivial and of little real value, these rituals, should they be omitted or deviate from their established format can have a negative effect, e.g. "What's the matter with him today then?"

Such rituals should therefore be maintained as they are anticipated and expected.

Scripts

Individuals develop stock phrases and 'scripts' that they use repeatedly when presented with analogous situations. These scripts can become akin to mantras and therefore degraded in the eyes of the recipient to the extent of becoming the subject of ridicule. The managers of a major, 'household name' software company were trained to use the phrase "What do you propose (*we do*)?" when presented with a problem by a subordinate. The idea being that by pushing the problem back to the subordinate, the manager would empower the subordinate and, through the subordinate's articulation of their proposed solution, place the 'ownership' of that solution on that employee's shoulders. This was a nice idea and one with some merit. However, in practice, the phrase became so over-used it became nothing more than a meaningless cliché.

Stroke economy

The concept of the Stroke Economy was created by Claude Steiner in the 1960's. He proposed that although the giving and receiving of strokes is 'free', the distribution of them works somewhat like a real economy. Steiner suggested that economising on giving strokes is learnt in childhood and results from our parents restricting the strokes we received from them as children, meaning that we had to work all the harder to receive the strokes we craved. We take this conditioning with us into adult life, which inhibits us in giving strokes to those around us. I refer back to the example above of the CEO who found it difficult to give praise. The rules for 'economising' on strokes are:

1. Do not give positive strokes, even though they are free to give.
2. Do not ask for positive strokes, even if you need them.
3. Do not accept positive strokes (compliments).
4. Do not reject strokes you do not want to hear (e.g., offensive remarks).
5. Do not give yourself strokes, including the sharing good things about yourself with others.

This is a false economy. However, these 'rules' are all too often followed by many within the workplace, especially managers. More productive rules to follow would be:

1. Give positive strokes because they cost nothing.
2. Ask for positive strokes when you need them.
3. Accept positive strokes (compliments).
4. Reject strokes you do not want to hear (e.g., offensive remarks).
5. Give yourself strokes, including sharing good things about yourself with others.

This and my previous article cover the basic concepts of TA. There are a few facets of TA that I have missed out, in the interests of including what may be directly relevant to the day to day interactions within the work environment. In a future article, I will explore the manipulative game playing that individuals may engage in together with the *Karpman Drama Triangle*, an adjunctive framework to TA and one which is often very relevant to conflict within the workplace.