

Transactional Analysis in conflict resolution: Ego states, Part 1 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 a brief guide to the basics.

Transactional Analysis (“TA”) is a long-established framework relating to the social interactions through which people communicate and relate to each other. It is a very useful framework to consider when dealing with interpersonal conflict and its causes. The framework was developed by Dr Eric Berne in *“Transactional Analysis: A New and Effective Method of Group Therapy”* which was published in the *American Journal of Psychotherapy* in 1958. Berne expanded upon this in his 1964 book *Games People Play*.

Berne mapped interpersonal relationships to three ego-states of the individuals involved: the **Parent, Adult, and Child** state. Although relevant to an individual’s ‘internal’ states, TA is of most relevance in the workplace to the dynamics involved in people's interactions with one another.

At any given time, a person experiences and manifests his or her personality through a mixture of behaviours, thoughts, and feelings according to these three ego states:

- **Parent:** a state in which people behave, feel, and think in response to an unconscious mimicking of how their parents (or other parental figures such as schoolteachers) acted, or how they interpreted their parent's actions. For example, a person may shout at someone out of frustration because, in childhood, they have seen an influential figure achieve his or her desired outcome by communicating in this way.
- **Adult:** a state of the ego which is most like an artificially intelligent system, processing information and making predictions about major emotions that could affect its operation. Learning to strengthen the Adult is a goal of TA. While a person is in the **Adult** ego state, he or she is directed towards an objective appraisal of reality.
- **Child:** a state in which people behave, feel, and think similarly to how they did in childhood. For example, a person who receives a poor appraisal at work may respond by looking at the floor and crying or pouting, as when told-off as a child. Conversely, a person who receives a good evaluation may respond joyfully and with a broad smile. The **Child** is the source of emotions, creation, recreation, spontaneity, and intimacy.

Whilst we may normally adopt one of these ego types as our dominant and preferred state, we all have the capacity to shift our ego state to another should circumstances or the context trigger us to do so. This is where conflict is likely to occur.

These three ego states can be sub-divided into positive and negative attributes. For example, the parent figure can be seen to be **nurturing** (permission-giving & security-giving) a positive attribute or **criticising** (undermining of an individual’s self-esteem & threatening) a negative attribute (**Nurturing Parent (NP)** vs. **Critical Parent (CP)**). Similarly, a Child ego state can be positive and seen to be more **free** & natural but also can be petulant, over emotional and rebellious or as being more compliant, passive and **adapted** to others (**Free Child (FC)** vs. **Adapted Child (AC)**).

Table 1: Examples of typical words, voice tones, behaviours and attitudes expressed by the differing ego-states during communication.

Ego state	Typical words/phrases	Typical voice tone	Typical behaviour	Typical attitudes
Critical Parent (CP)	That is appalling behaviour.	Angry	Furrowed brow Pointed finger Pounding on table	Judgemental Authoritarian
Nurturing Parent (NP)	Don't worry, I will sort it out for you.	Sympathetic	Consoling touch	Caring Understanding
Adult (A)	When?	Calm Enquiring	Relaxed Attentive and aware Level eye contact	Non-judgemental
Adapted Child (AC)	I will do my best. Thank you.	Placating	Downcast eyes Vigorous head nodding	Passive, serious
Free Child (FC)	That is great!	Expressive	Clear demonstration of feelings	Spontaneous

In the workplace, an adult manager may take on the Parent role, and reprimand an adult employee as though he or she were a **Child**, which would likely (and often does) provoke a petulant & childish response. The aim should be for peers, superiors and subordinates to try to maintain **Adult to Adult** transactions. These are termed **complementary transactions**. This is unless the context (such as an extreme crisis) demands otherwise. The world of work is normally a world of interactions between adults and not one where a typical **Parent -> Child** transaction would or should happen.

In *Games People Play*, Berne gives this as example of a **complementary Parent->Child** transaction: "The fevered child asks for a glass of water, and the nurturing mother brings it." In this, a small child adopts his or her **Child** ego state seeks nurture from the **Parent** of his or her mother. The (nurturing) **Parent** ego state of the mother acknowledges this stimulus, and gives the water to the child. In this example, the small child's request is the stimuli, and the parent providing the water is the response. Within the workplace, a similar transaction could be a subordinate, aware that his or her employer is in financial difficulty, expresses his or her worries to his or her manager (in a **Adapted Child** ego state) and the manager responds (in a **Nurturing Parent** state) by giving reassurance that matters are under control and that the employee has nothing to worry about.

Complementary transactions are normally satisfactory where the ego state of the **agent** providing the stimulus is complementary to the ego state of the recipient of the stimulus (the **respondent**).

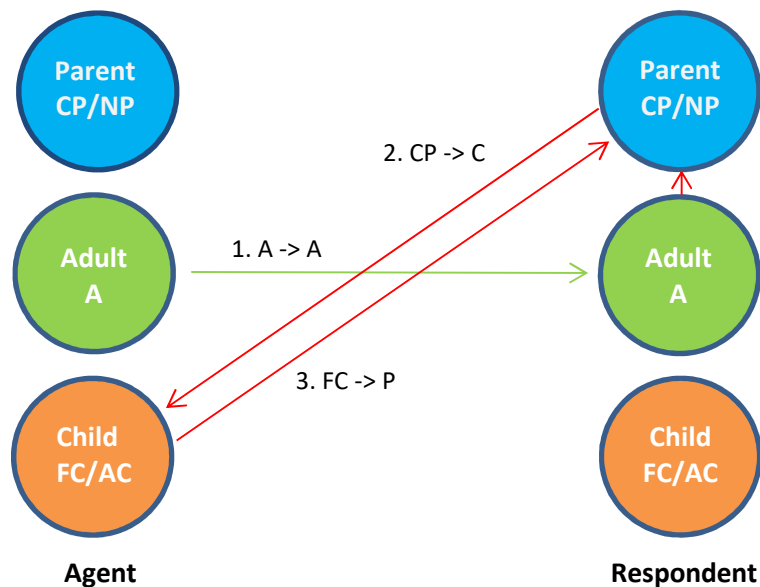
The problem arises when the **agent** provides the stimulus in an ego state that is not **complementary** to the ego state of the **respondent**. This results in a **crossed transaction**. To give an example:

Stephen (**Adult**) asks his manager "Did you see I left the monthly sales report on your desk for you?"

Manager (**Critical Parent**): "Yes, but it's a week late again and it's missing some of the information I needed. Why are you always late getting this to me and letting me down like this? I can't put up with this for much longer!"

Stephen (now adopting his **Free Child** ego state): "You're always picking holes in what I do and having a go at me. You don't treat other people in the department as badly as you treat me!"

Here an **Adult** stimulus rather than receiving a **complementary** (and expected) **Adult** response, instead elicited a **Critical Parent** response (**crossed transaction**) causing Stephen to change his ego state and adopt a petulant **Free Child's** reaction. A crossed transaction can be illustrated as below:



A more **complementary transaction** may have gone the following way:

Stephen (**Adult**) asks his manager “Did you see I left the monthly sales report on your desk for you?”

Manager (**Adult**): “Yes, and I can tell you must have hit some issues in getting it to me on time. What problems did you have and how do you propose we overcome these in the future?”

Stephen (remaining in his **Adult** ego state): “Well, the bottleneck seems to be in getting the figures in from the branches. It would be useful if you could add some weight to my efforts to getting these in in good time. Maybe a memo, which I could write but could come from you, emphasising the importance of us having the numbers to hand would help.”

It should follow that an ego state is neither good nor bad, provided the respective positions are complementary and crossed transactions are avoided. The various **Parent (NP & CP)** and **Child (FC & AC)** positions all may have either positive or negative outcomes. The context of the situation within which the ‘transaction’ takes place is the deciding factor.

Table 2: Positive/negative communications from the different ego states

1. Positive (NP)	Shows concern and cares for another person when they need or want it.
2. Negative (NP)	Does things for others when not needed or requested. Such interference may disempower or repress the other person.
3. Positive (CP)	Stands up for his or her rights in an assertive manner without putting others down. Constructively criticises.
4. Negative (CP)	Disapproving in a style that affects the self-worth of another. Destructively criticises.

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| 5. Positive (AC) | Behaves in line with social expectations. Saying “please”, “thank you”, “sorry”. |
| 6. Negative (AC)* | Self-destructive behaviour that is out of line with social expectations. Persistent lateness, over confidence or rebellion. |
| 7. Positive (FC) | Expresses thoughts, enjoys the moment in a way that does not harm others. Is endearing, demonstrative and spontaneous. |
| 8. Negative (FC) | Expresses thoughts that may be harmful others. Is self-centred and egotistical. |

** Adaptive behaviour relates to the behaviours an individual adopts, based on his or her belief systems/filters, to protect his or her self-esteem. These may actually be maladaptive. These are inappropriate coping behaviours that may manifest themselves as being passive aggressive or self-destructive in nature.*

Naturally, it is not just ‘what’ is being said that conveys the full meaning of any transaction. In addition to the words used, an ever greater emphasis is placed by the listener on the tone with which they are delivered and the facial and other non-verbal signals given by the speaker such as hand gestures and eye movements.

This first part of a brief guide to TA will be expanded upon in future articles. In the next I will explore the one of the other key components of TA, that of positive and negative **Strokes**.