

# Transaction Analysis - the three states

The theory of transactional analysis was developed by Eric Berne in the 1950's. He suggested that when we communicate with others we do so in one of three states. We communicate as a parent would communicate, as a child would communicate, or as an adult communicates.

The state that we fall into will be based on our past experiences.

When we are in the parent state, we can adopt one of two approaches. We can be:

- Nurturing Parent – In this state we are very caring and maternal.
- Controlling Parent – In this state we can be controlling and judgemental.

In the child state we can also do one of two things. We can be:

- Free Child – In this state we are carefree, playful, uninhibited (and undisciplined) and creative.
- Adapted Child – In this state we can be obedient or, on the other hand, resentful or manipulative.

In the adult state we behave much more logically, basing what we say and do on facts and an objective analysis of the situation.

All of us have access to all three states, and we all use different ones at different times. They all have their uses, have their strengths and weaknesses and are appropriate in different circumstances. For example free child state is particularly useful if we want to generate lots of new ideas in a brainstorm session.

We are however, likely to have preferred states or a tendency to adopt some more than others, and it is the balance between the three which are said to make up our personality.

To understand how we can achieve smoother more effective communication with people we need to understand how we are communicating.

## **The Parent State**

The parent state has two sides:

Controlling, disciplining, restricting parent, using words like:

- Right/wrong.
- Good/bad.
- Never/always.

Nurturing, helpful, caring, loving parent, using words like:

- What a shame.
- Take care.
- Remember to...

- I'll help you...
- It won't take me long to...

This state comes from our experiences of life with our parents and teachers, particularly in early life:

- "Sit up straight at the table" (controlling)
- "Use your knife and fork properly" (controlling)
- "Bring it here and Mummy will help you" (nurturing)

When we feel, think, talk and behave in the way we remember our parents doing then we are adopting a parent state:

- "In our line of business..." (controlling)
- "Leave it to me..." (nurturing)

Often it is the attitude rather than the actual words that reveal themselves in later life.

### **The Adult State**

All facts, logic and common sense contribute to the adult state. It is the mature and deliberating part of personality. When we are in this state our actions and words are sensible and well considered - as opposed to the almost automatic reactions of the parent or child states. In the adult state we collect information, evaluate it, work out possibilities and resolve problems in a logical, calm way. We concentrate on facts - not feelings and prejudices.

### **The Child State**

The child state represents the child we once were. It comes from all our emotions and early experiences as well as our initial view of ourselves and others. It has two facets:

- The natural or free child – impulsive, instinctive, creative, undisciplined and demanding.
- The adapted child – carrying the influences of our upbringing, "doing as we are told" giving rise to guilt, rebellion, obedience and compromise.

In the child state we'll use words like:

- I won't.
- I must.
- I like.
- You always try to...
- Help me...
- If only...
- It's not fair.

## **Dominant states**

It is important to determine which is your dominant state and decide for yourself when this is an advantage and when a disadvantage.

If you have a dominant “controlling parent” state then you almost certainly have a strong personality and probably find it relatively easy to get people to do what you want of them. Take care of making enemies or giving people the impression that you do not respect them. Watch too that you don’t put a block on others developing ideas or skills.

A dominant “caring parent” state can create a strong positive impression. You can be seen as good and helpful. However, an exaggerated concern for others can inhibit them and take away their influence. It can also result in you taking on too much yourself in a desire to help.

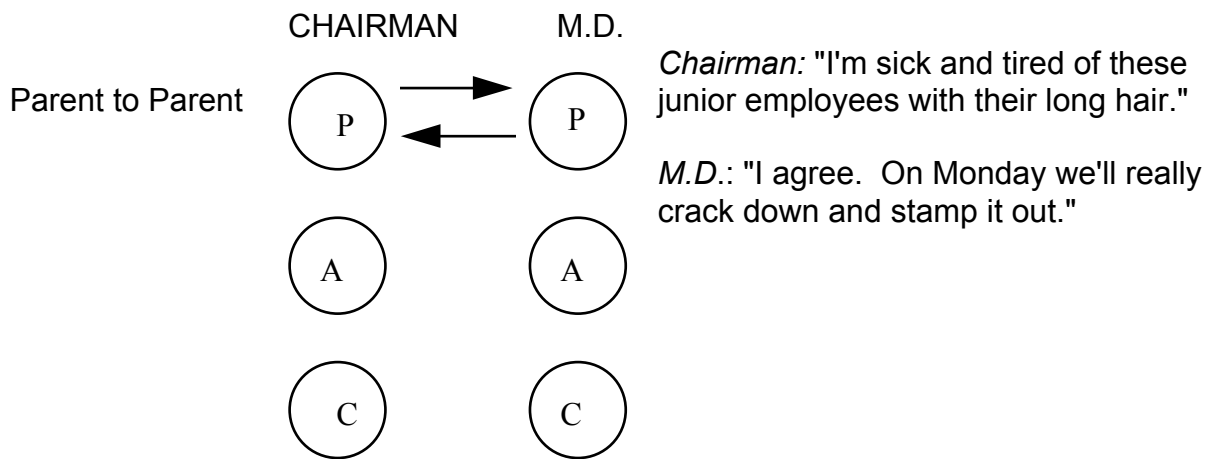
A dominant “adult” state has advantages in many circumstances. In difficult, stressful or quarrelsome situations the best you can do is to relax and stick to the facts. If you are respected as a person who keeps a cool head then people will turn to you for advice. If your adult state is too dominant there is a risk that you won’t spend enough time having fun.

A dominant “child” state contains great powers such as intuition, spontaneity and inspiration. It is very useful when you want to think creatively and generate ideas. In the child state you can spread happiness, warmth and a love of life. You can inspire and motivate people and get them to accept your proposals for emotional reasons. However, the child state also contains primitive aggression, resentment, and even selfish responses.

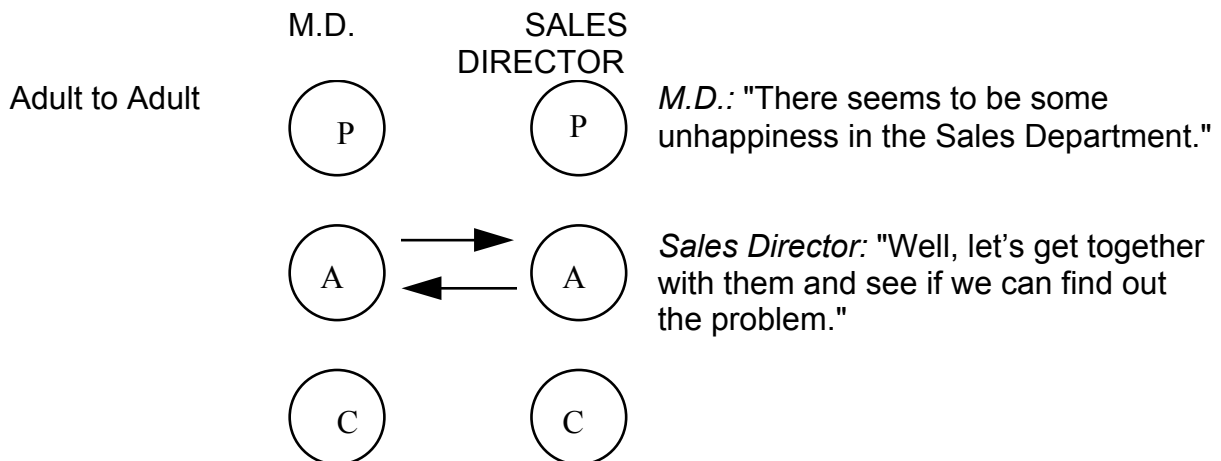
## **Parallel and crossed transactions**

When two people get together, a transaction occurs that can be observed and analysed. These can be parallel transactions, which proceed smoothly because each party is using the expected state. However, we get crossed transactions when one party adopts a state that was not expected. This is when we can get into conflict and difficulties.

Parallel Transactions            A transaction is a communication between ego states. There are two sorts of transactions - parallel and crossed. Let us look at some examples.



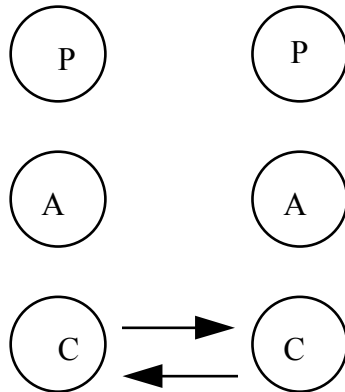
Here two people are talking to one another criticising a third party. They are agreeing with each other. There is no conflict so the lines of communication are parallel.



Again, the two people are communicating well. Many business communications are on this level.

Child to Child

DISSATISFIED  
COLLEAGUE TO  
ANOTHER  
DISSATISFIED CLERK

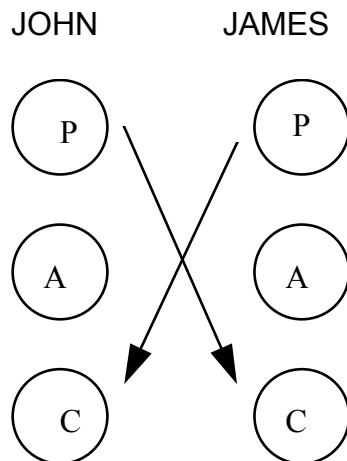


*DISSATISFIED COLLEAGUE:* "I'm always given the boring work. My boss never gives me any responsibility."

*ANOTHER DISSATISFIED COLLEAGUE:* "I'm like a nurse maid. I have to run errands for my boss all the time."

These two are having a good old gripe session and are really getting on well!

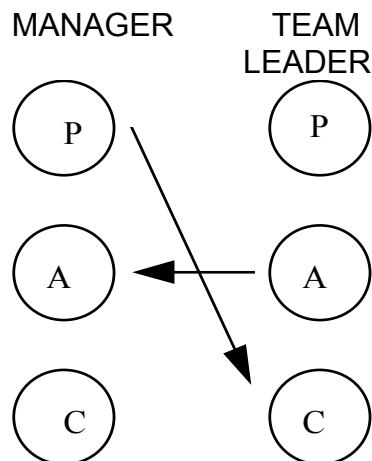
Crossed Transactions



*JOHN:* "Why do you always ask me the time? Go out and buy a watch for yourself. Do you understand?"

*JAMES:* "I don't need you to tell me what to do. Why don't you learn some manners?"

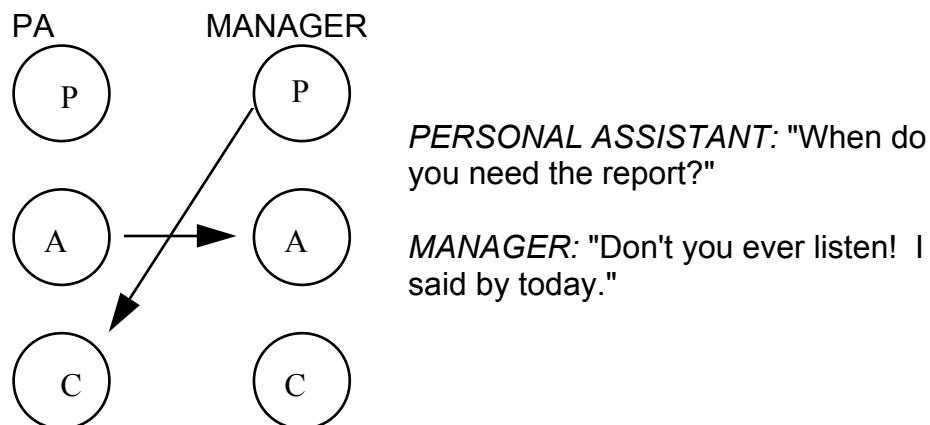
Here both people are criticising each other, they are both in the parent ego state, but lines of communication here are crossed and these is conflict.



*MANAGER:* "When will you organise your staff to come in on time? They're always late"

*TEAM LEADER:* "Can you tell me who was late and I'll follow it up?"

The manager here is in his parent ego state, but despite being talked down to as if he was a child, the team leader responds adult to adult.



The personal assistant here talks to the manager in a non-provocative, reasonable way but he snaps back at her in his parent ego state. Again because of the crossed transaction, there is conflict.

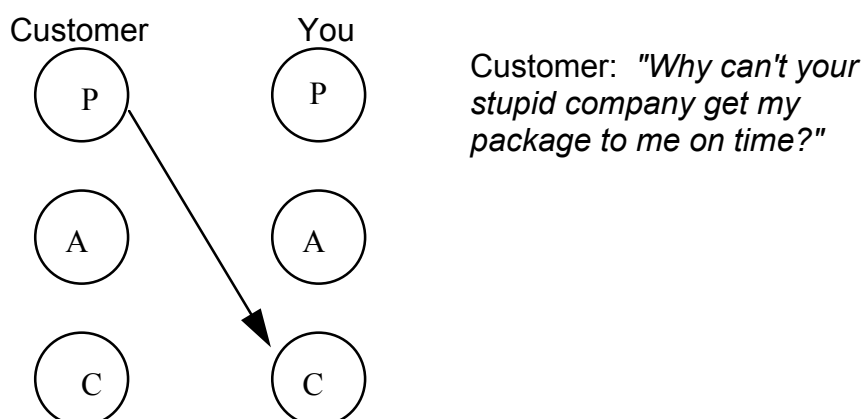
Which conflict situation is closest to being resolved? The manager/team leader situation is closest to being resolved because of team leader adult response.

What can we learn from this?

- When we get crossed lines on transactions then communication is broken
- if we can avoid crossed lines we can avoid conflict situations
- if we can recognise which ego state the other person is in by the way he is treating us, then we can solve conflict. In business we usually aim for an Adult - Adult transaction.

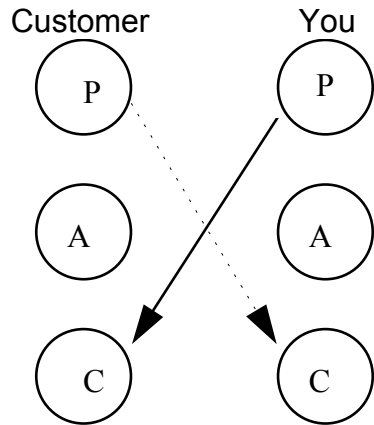
Let us look at some examples:

Say a customer addresses you as parent to child.



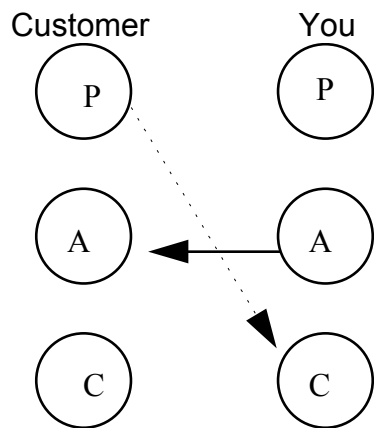
You have a few options as to how you could reply ...

You could snap right back at him.



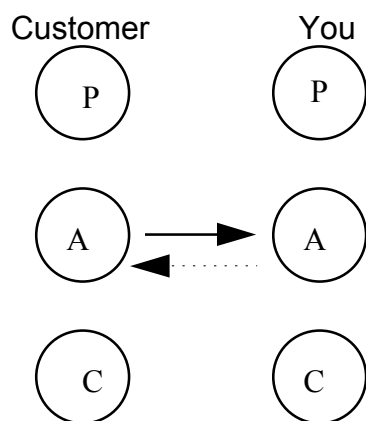
*You: "Who are you calling stupid?"*

Far better to stay calm, adult and rational.



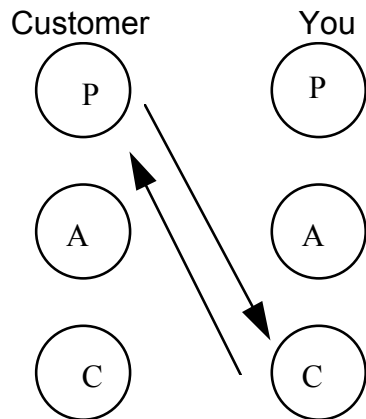
*You: "If you could just give me the details, I will get on to sorting out your problems right away".*

This gives a chance to get the customer back on to the adult - adult level when he realises that you are concerned and want to help him with his problems.



*Customer: "Well I'm relieved that somebody is going to do something about this."*

Depending on the circumstances an apology might be due. This involves being temporarily dominated:

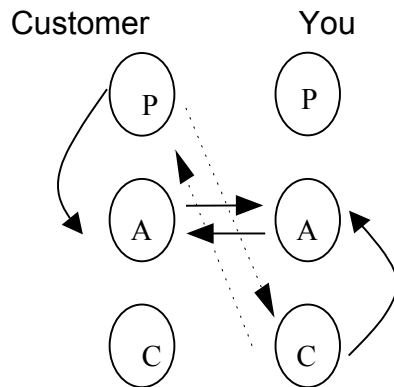


Customer: *"Why can't your stupid company get my package to me on time?"*

You: *"I'm sorry, we did mess things up this time for you. We had a problem at our delivery depot and didn't check the date."*

*"I'm really sorry to cause you a problem."*

But this brief 'eating of humble pie' is worth it if it acts as a stepping stone to establish an adult -to-adult interaction.



Customer: *"Well, I suppose these sort of things do happen".*

You: *"Let's see what we can do to get things sorted out quickly."*