

# Is Drama Detouring Your Association from Its Mission?

By **John and Jacki Davidoff**

**L**ast Friday, the board of directors of a prominent organization received a presentation by its law firm following an investigation of employee complaints regarding the organization's culture. At the report's conclusion, the CEO resigned, effective immediately—the latest in a string of top executive resignations. Just after those events, we received a phone call from a member of the organization's executive committee. "How should we 'message' the situation?" they asked us, explaining that the party line was that the CEO resigned "to spend more time with his family."

"We just stopped trusting you," we replied. We knew this would likely upset the prospective client. But we didn't want to be party to the drama coming through the phone line loud and clear.

Several red flags made the drama obvious:

- Turnover of multiple CEOs
- Complaints from employees about the culture, serious enough to warrant a legal investigation
- Board choice to misrepresent CEO resignation as unrelated to legal investigation
- Interpretation of situation as a "messaging" problem rather than symptom of a drama culture with low integrity and accountability

There are short- and long-term consequences of failing to recognize drama in your association. These consequences can lead to significant damage to the organization's reputation with current and prospective employees, members, board members, donors, funders, the media, volunteers, and government representatives. As important, internal drama becomes a dominant focus, distracting the organization from its mission and service to its stakeholders.

While the organization described above is an obvious example of what we call a "destructive drama culture," the symptoms often take much subtler form, such as employees, teams or departments within associations who relate to each other through blame, competition for resources, denial of responsibility, and avoidance of resolving problems.

This article is about identifying destructive drama cultures and how to address such situations before more damage is done. We will define such

drama cultures, explain why associations may be more prone to them now than in the past, and present five types of such cultures. We will also offer tips for tackling destructive drama in your association, helping to move the organization from Mission-Challenged to Mission-Driven.

## How Drama Detours

Dr. Judith Wright, executive coach and professor of emotional intelligence at the Wright Graduate University for the Realization of Human Potential, suggests that people could well spend more than 90 percent of their waking hours in some form of drama. The challenge for organizational leaders and their employees is to create a culture with high self-awareness—emotional intelligence—such that they're aware of the tendency toward drama dynamics. These association executives seek to notice drama (their own and others') and develop the skills to shift out of it, shaping a culture that brings relief to and motivates teams and individuals.

The idea is not to eliminate drama. That's not possible. But certain types of unchecked drama, such as the CEO-resignation situation noted at the opening of the article, can impede organizations from fulfilling their missions. This kind of drama diminishes morale and leads to low-performing teams and disengaged staff at every level. In such cases, relationships with internal and external stakeholders are vulnerable to short- or long-term setbacks and disruption.

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### What Is a Drama Culture?

Drama describes conflictual and unproductive interactions among two or more people. A destructive drama culture—or “drama culture,” for short—is an organizational culture marked by unacknowledged, pervasive drama.

It’s important to recognize that most any human interaction will have some elements of drama, and that’s not a bad thing. You, the reader, are likely in some degree of drama right now! Organizations are especially prone to drama, given the large number of interactions they involve, often with high stakes. But there’s drama and then there’s drama.

In our research on what defines a *mission-driven* organization, a drama culture will invariably illuminate where an organization is *mission-challenged*. We’re talking about cultures that are chronically, negatively dramatic, with unhealthy implications for their mission and stakeholders. The costs of this include poor functioning, low morale, high turnover and low outcome-effectiveness.

We have found the “drama triangle” a useful framework for understanding the origination and operation of multiple kinds of drama cultures. First proposed by Dr. Steven Karpman (a student of Eric Berne, the psychologist who developed transactional analysis), the drama triangle suggests that people in dysfunctional interactions take one of three roles, based on their natural personality/tendencies and early experiences.

Below we present the three interactive roles Karpman proposed, with our own take on them from our observations of organizations:

- **Victim:** Those who perceive they are persecuted by others. They also may be in denial or self-pitying, leading to ineffectiveness.
- **Persecutor:** Stereotypical bullies but also those who act in passive-aggressive ways, ultimately diminishing performance and morale.
- **Rescuer:** Ostensibly, these are do-gooders who want to help others (especially victims), but they may be dysfunctional in their own way, focusing on others’ problems instead of their own.

Importantly, people in organizations often become entrenched in their specific roles for long periods, contributing to a negative pattern of interactions and performance at all levels.

### Drama Culture in Associations

Our work within and research on the association sector reveals several factors that have made associations more at risk for drama culture.

For most of the last decade, in response to a changing economy, the association sector has transformed how it delivers programs and services to members. This has manifested in reductions in staff size, increased outsourcing, and greater demands on remaining full-time leaders and their staffs to operate at maximum productivity levels. Similarly, many associations have had to eliminate vague job descriptions and raise expectations of responsibilities for each role in their now-smaller organizational staff—which has increased accountability and left little room for suboptimal performers to “hide.”

The silver lining in shifting to the new

model of association management has driven expectations of greater productivity among individuals and teams. Many associations have risen admirably to the imperative of becoming leaner, meaner, and more efficient. Their leaders have built their mission, vision, action plans, operations, and culture around the principles of mission-driven leadership: accountability, responsibility, mutuality, integrity, and empowerment, among others. This includes creating drama-free cultures and taking active steps to address any emergent symptoms of drama, which maintains high performance levels.

Still, given that culture is often “in the walls,” it can be difficult to identify the presence and impact of drama, especially in the face of shifting sector dynamics. Indeed, our study of associations shows that many are “head down,” focused on core operations such as membership services, programs, advocacy, funding, and board relations. While strong operations are a key attribute of association management, it can also keep an organization from maintaining vigilance around the changing needs of key stakeholders (members, funders, strategic partners, others) and the shifting environment of its industry or sector, potentially providing pressures and uncertainty that spur unwanted drama to enter the culture.

Such “drama creep” is difficult to detect, like an invisible cancer eating away at the internal organs of an association, requiring awareness, vigilance, and a highly proactive approach. The next section discusses how to recognize signs of drama culture, including specific forms it might take.

### Five Types of Drama Culture

Our work with associations and other organizations has highlighted multiple signs and symptoms of drama culture, as characterized by five specific types we’ll discuss below.

Generally, drama cultures will have overt and covert features. Some may be obvious to those within and outside the association, like visible conflict and resistance among colleagues, abuse of power by leaders or employees, or actions that go directly against an association’s mission. Others will be more subtle and harder to detect,

such as denial, mistrust, gossip, backstabbing, or jockeying for recognition. All contribute to poor outcomes for performance and morale.

Think of the drama culture types below as “pure forms,” rather than those reflecting the exact situation of a given association. Some actual organizations may indeed fit the description very well; but most associations with a problematic culture will have features associated with multiple types. Regardless, understanding the drama cultures here can help you identify challenging elements of your association’s culture and take steps to improve.

**Slow Death Drama: (“Everything is fine”)** These associations have typically been struggling with remaining relevant to their members and their missions for a long period, but are in deep denial of this reality. Leaders and others in the organization can’t see and/or have chosen not to keep pace with the world changing outside their walls, while also failing to deal with cultural erosion within their walls. For example, we know of a global tech-related association “making its membership numbers” every year, but at the same time becoming less relevant as nimbler, more tech-savvy rivals gain ground.

**Zero-Trust Drama: (“Everyone for themselves”)** These cultures are marked by backstabbing, gossip, poor information-sharing, and lack of transparency/communication. In many cases, the organizational culture is marked by scarcity (of funding, resources, staff). Fundraisers or foundation executives may be trying to develop their own relationships to funders, taking credit for others’ work, or actively seeking outside opportunities. This type of culture can involve both active aggression and passive aggression, whether it’s outright conflict such as that of our opening-example association, or more subtly destructive interactions, such as people reluctant even to copy colleagues or “reply all” to emails. At another association, trust runs so low that even the most minor decision must be made by consensus, impeding progress across levels.

**Pervasive Denial Drama: (“No problems here”)** In associations with this drama culture (a more general form of the Slow Death Drama above), conflict is avoided at all costs, as people deny

its existence in the first place. People may be civil with one another and seem satisfied enough, but there's no real engagement with internal or external parties, no enthusiasm for the mission and vision. The general feeling in such cultures is that people have given up on their own fulfillment, and certainly that of the organization/mission, and are just "punching the clock," present physically but not in spirit.

**Anxiety Drama: ("Nothing is certain")** Here, the main theme is uncertainty, as people don't know what will happen in the future, both to themselves and to the association and its mission. While anxiety can be part of a healthy organization (as we discuss later), this type of anxiety is destructive and breeds second-guessing, sticking to suboptimal routines, maintenance of the status quo, catastrophizing (believing the worst will happen and it will be unmanageable, such as losing all funding sources), and the appearance of being busy without making meaningful progress. In such associations, people may seem engaged, but they're engaged with the wrong activities: instead of delivering high-quality programs or services or seeking to improve service, they are caught up in busywork or other low-value-added activities, such as attending meetings with little real impact on organizational goals.

**Authoritarian Drama: ("Our leader is everything")** In these associations, everything is up to and depends on the leader (or small leadership group), often a charismatic but highly controlling figure. As a result, there's no real collective decision-making, even if there are committees and other ostensible decision-making groups/interactions. Indeed, people take no responsibility for development of potential at both the individual and organizational levels. Some people have blind trust in the leader and simply "toe the party line," while others who might normally contribute novel ideas fail to do so, believing their contributions will be shot down or stolen. Not surprisingly, these organizations struggle with succession (planning and execution), and their missions suffer under controlling leadership and during any leadership transitions, as there are few healthy systems and interactions in place.

## Deal Proactively with Drama Culture

The good news is that a drama culture, even a highly destructive one, need not represent a permanent state for your association. There are specific steps you can take to address and improve such a culture, with the goal of moving from Mission-Challenged to Mission-Driven. Our work with a range of organizations along this spectrum has yielded specific steps for addressing drama cultures, as detailed below.

**Identify the drama:** The first step is to assess the presence of drama and its potential sources. The descriptions of drama culture types above present many of the symptoms to look for: aggressive and passive aggressive behavior, conflict, denial, catastrophizing, withholding information, second-guessing, clock-punching, and many others. Importantly, such drama can happen at any level of the organization, including the leadership team, board, and general ranks.

**Accept the presence of some drama:** Here we don't mean to accept all the elements of a destructive drama culture, but to acknowledge that drama is a natural part of any organizational landscape, including yours. Culture is the sea we swim in, and drama is inevitable within it. So rather than asking "How can I get rid of any drama here?," ask "What drama elements are in the way of our mission, and how can I contribute to identifying and addressing the symptoms?"

**Identify sources of drama:** Once you've identified elements of a drama culture—and recognized the difference between naturally occurring and destructive drama—work to understand their sources. These can be wide-ranging. It's possible that one person is driving much of the drama in your culture, such as an overly ego-driven leader or manager. But more likely, drama emerges from a dysfunctional system with multiple contributors. As suggested by the drama triangle concept we presented earlier, drama is inevitable when people habitually play specific roles of persecutor, victim, and rescuer. Drama can also stem from misalignment or unexpressed needs among staff, leaders, and boards, such as unwillingness to talk about conflict in a productive way, repression of true opinions, and fear of

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or failure to deal with the natural emotions that arise when people work together. Identify and document as many sources of drama as possible and look for how these may relate or feed into one another to develop a plan for improvement.

**Create and maintain a Mission-Driven culture:** Rather than taking a narrow approach to improving specific sources of drama, the general goal should be to create and actively maintain a high-performance, mission-driven culture—one that gives people little motivation to create drama, and rather to direct their efforts and energy at upholding the association's mission. Among the multiple, non-exhaustive elements of Mission-Driven cultures are:

- **Support for mistakes and anxiety:** Within Mission-Driven cultures, people understand that failure and mistakes are inevitable parts of doing business, with the goal of learning from these rather than engaging in blame or justification (as happens in drama cultures). Similarly, there's recognition that anxiety can be a positive indicator of an association's commitment to high-value, high-stakes outcomes for members and broader society. On the other hand, excessive anxiety and avoidance of anxiety and conflict can contribute to drama cultures, as described earlier.
- **Empowerment and autonomy:** In Mission-Driven cultures, leaders feel empowered by their boards and fellow executives, and those in the more general ranks feel empowered by leadership to serve their members. Empowerment and autonomy actually create a greater sense of trust throughout the organization, improving communication and performance.
- **Ownership:** Empowerment and autonomy also promote a greater sense of ownership among your people, such that everyone owns her/his own role and responsibility while also looking out for others. Do people go home after they complete their deliverables or stick around to help others with theirs? Is there a "not-my-job" mentality in your organization or one where people routinely step outside the offi-

cial bounds of their roles to help fulfill the mission? Answering these questions can help you determine the level of ownership people assume in your association and take steps to improve it.

- **Principles and systems of excellence:** Hoping for excellent performance isn't enough. You need to have specific principles and systems in place to make it happen. That can mean things like asking everyone to pledge not to withhold information from colleagues. Or ensuring people presume good faith when assessing their colleague's motives. Or creating an environment that encourages and rewards authentic expression, vulnerability, and risk-taking. There are many others, and the idea is to develop and communicate from within the staff what principles they want to orient to in their interactions with each other and throughout the association.

We hope your association is free of the drama culture elements described here. If so, congratulations! (And we don't believe you!) If not, reading this article may well be the first step in your journey to identifying, acknowledging, and improving your drama culture. There is hope—we see it in associations that decide to shape their cultures for the benefit of their staff, volunteers, and ultimately, their members. It helps to have humor as a starting point, and to recognize it's a journey—possibly the most worthwhile journey to take. 📧

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