

# TOOLS OF THE TRADE



In a regular series, **Carol Wilson** identifies the tools and models frequently used during coaching projects. This month, she looks at Transactional Analysis

**T**ransactional Analysis was conceived by psychologist **Eric Berne**, famous for his 1960s best seller *Games People Play*. The name refers to the social interactions, or 'transactions', that take place between people.

"The unit of social intercourse is called a transaction. If two or more people encounter each other... sooner or later one of them will speak, or give some other indication of acknowledging the presence of the others. This is called transactional stimulus. Another person will then say or do something which is in some way related to the stimulus, and that is called the transactional response." (Eric Berne *Games People Play*.)

In the course of working with hundreds of patients in the 1950s, Berne noticed a familiar pattern occurring: most of them tended to be in any one of three states, all of which existed alongside each other. He defined these states as Parent, Child and Adult.

The Parent state occurs when people are reproducing behaviours or attitudes absorbed from their own parents or early role models. Babies are programmed to learn by reproducing what they see and experience from the people around them; some of those patterns are useful in later life, others are not.

If you have ever heard yourself speak, and then thought (perhaps with horror) *'that's what my mother/father used to say'*, you were having an Eric Berne Parent moment.

Reproduced Parent transactions can be useful in providing discipline and responsibility; negative results can be controlling, bullying, didactic, critical and judgmental. Words like *always*, *never*, *once and for all* may be used.

The Child state is a reproduction of the reaction we had to the transaction with our own parents. Berne came to realise that babies require interaction (or

transactions) with other humans from birth to develop and that, if no positive transactions are available, they prefer negative transactions to none at all. This is why negative behaviour is assimilated as much as positive. The negative behaviour exhibited in Child transactions might be sadness, despairing, throwing temper tantrums, giggling and speaking in baby talk. The language might involve the use of words like *I'm gonna*, *things never go right for me*, *the best ever*.

The Adult state is the label Berne gave to the times when we are interacting 'in the moment' without repeating a pattern from the past. This is the healthy way of living, free of the baggage of past prejudices, painful memories and 'knee jerk' reactions. These types of transactions are straightforward, attentive, non-threatening and not being threatened, using tempered language like *I see* (rather than a contradiction), *possibly* (rather than *never*), *probably* (not *definitely*), *disappointing* (not *devastating*), *I think* and *I believe* (taking responsibility, instead of *you are*, *it is always*, *it never*).

The language of coaching aims to exhibit all these Adult qualities and encourages coachees to take responsibility, discard prejudice and view each situation with a clean slate instead of falling back on previous behaviour patterns.

Babies and children tend to absorb and reproduce all the transactions they experience. As we grow older, we can make choices between the behaviours we reproduce, but it is not always easy to distinguish a pattern of behaviour set in place by childhood experience from that which is an untainted approach. Ancient patterns sometimes seem bewildering to ourselves and to those around us. An example of such a pattern is the statement *'men/women always leave me'* which

sets up an unconscious pattern of choosing only those partners who will leave. Another is *'I never do anything right'*, which results in people sabotaging their own success.

The most useful aspect of Transactional Analysis in terms of coaching's solution-focused approach is its underlying philosophy that everyone has the ability to change; our behaviour patterns are not innate character traits but mere habits that can be mastered and reprogrammed.

Berne's original work has been developed by a number of psychologists, in particular Ian Stewart and Vann Joines, and Thomas Harris MD, who wrote the best seller *I'm OK, You're OK* in the 1960s. Taking Berne's three transactional states a stage further, Harris identified four positions people can take in their relationship to each other, which result in either effective or ineffective communication.

His theories were neatly expressed in a quadrant, which Franklyn Ernst devised and called the OK Corral. (See figure 1)

### I am not OK – You are OK

This is Berne's Child state, when people feel 'small'; a new employee might feel incompetent, or someone with a fear of authority might become tongue-tied when speaking to the boss. This state of mind might result in frustration, tantrums or simply not achieving very much through fear and refusal to take responsibility.

### I am OK – You are not OK

This state of mind can produce bullying, at home or at work. It is the equivalent of Berne's Parent position. It might mean taking too much responsibility for another person's results, which goes against the coaching way of thinking.

### I am not OK – You are not OK

This is the worst possible result

when people are behaving from either or both of Berne's Parent and Child states: everyone gives up and you might hear words like *'This is hopeless'*, *'She goes or I go'*, *'We'll never get anywhere'*. The equivalent phrases expressed during childhood might have been *'I'm not playing any more'* from the child or *'The conversation is closed'* from an adult. It is the easiest way out of a difficult situation and the least productive for everyone concerned.

### I am OK – You are OK

This is Berne's Adult state, where both people in the transaction take responsibility and make some effort; each might be saying *'I am capable and confident and I believe you are capable and confident. Together we can do great things'*. This is the peer-to-peer stance that underlies good coaching, rather than a master-pupil type of relationship.

The ideas set out above can be enormously productive when used in coaching or leadership work. Explaining the squares in the quadrant to a frustrated manager and asking him to place where he stands in different situations and with different people can be a revelation to that manager, and may enable him to make a choice about where he wishes to stand instead of following the primitive patterns he formed in childhood. The manager could be asked to shade in the diagram to identify his stance. (See figure 2)

This can be done several times for various situations and relationships.

Equally, the coach can ask a leader where she stands in relationship to her reports and where each stands in relationship to her. The diagram can form a rich basis for a whole coaching session and has proved to be an effective instrument for bringing about real change.



Figure 1

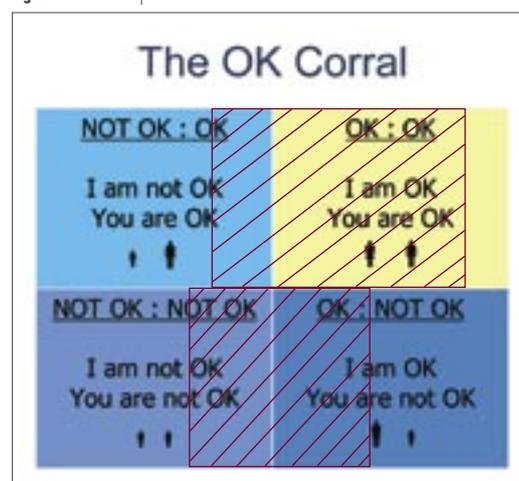


Figure 2

#### Further reading

1. Berne E *Games People Play*
2. Harris T, Harris A *I'm OK - You're OK*
3. Stewart I, Joines V *TA Today*
4. Harris T, Harris A *Staying OK*
5. Berne E *What do You Say After You Say Hello*
6. Steiner C *Scripts People Live*
7. Woollams & Brown *The Total Handbook Of Transactional Analysis*
8. Hay J *Transactional Analysis for Trainers*
9. Wagner A *The Transactional Manager*

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