

# TRANSACTIONAL COMMUNICATION

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When you communicate with another person, you are engaging in a “transaction” with that person. For years, psychologists have been using a framework to describe such a transaction, which they call “transactional analysis” or, simply, TA.

TA theorists start with the notion that we each have three different ways of approaching situations—three states of mind they refer to as *ego states*. These are: *the Parent*, *the Adult*, and *the Child*. Each of these ego states drives different kinds of behaviors. All are normal states of mind and each develops from our experiences as we grow into adulthood.

Your *Parent* ego state comes from what you learned about right and wrong, good and bad, and how you should behave. It is the source of your judgments.

Your *Adult* ego state is the analytical part of you that examines situations and draws conclusions. It is the source of your logical, problem-solving thinking.

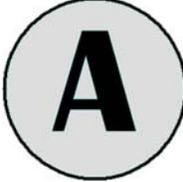
Your *Child* ego state is the playful part of you that is creative, spontaneous, and intuitive. It is the source of your feelings.

Communication involves all three ego states. The quality of any given communication between two people is determined by the ego state of each participant at the time of the communication transaction.

TA theorists illustrate the three ego states with three circles, one for *Parent*, one for *Adult*, and one for *Child* as shown in Figure 1 below:

*Figure 1*

## The Three Ego States

	The <i>Parent</i> ego state is a “parental” state of mind in which your communication is characterized by parental type statements you’ve learned over the years— <i>critical</i> statements or <i>nurturing</i> statements. You may use more judgmental and critical words such as: <i>should</i> or <i>should not</i> ; <i>right</i> or <i>wrong</i> ; <i>good</i> or <i>bad</i> ; <i>smart</i> or <i>dumb</i> ; and so on. Or you may use nurturing statements such as <i>poor baby</i> ; <i>good job!</i> ; <i>here—let me help you make it better</i> .
	The <i>Adult</i> ego state is a logical, analytical, problem-solving state of mind. Your words reflect objective observations, facts, and rational thinking. Your communication is reasonable, practical, and unemotional. In this state of mind, you investigate and solve problems, ask questions about what is happening, gather information, make and implement decisions. In this ego state, you distinguish between fact and fiction, and reality and fantasy.
	The <i>Child</i> ego state is a feeling state of mind, Your words express emotions such as excitement, happiness, sadness, guilt, shame, and revenge. In this state of mind, you are <i>free</i> in your use of words (such as <i>wow!</i> or <i>gee!</i> ), <i>adaptive</i> in your use of words (words that reflect politeness and pleasing behaviors), or <i>rebellious</i> (using challenging words such as <i>oh yeah?</i> or <i>you can’t make me!</i> ). In your child ego state of mind you are also intuitive and empathetic.

You learn the language of your *Parent* ego state as you learn how to speak. From your parents or other authority figures in your life, you learn all about the rules and regulations of life—the “should’s” and “should not’s,” the “do’s” and “don’ts.” Those of us raised by more critical or angry parents reach adulthood with many, many regulations in our heads. Those of us raised by more nurturing parents, reach adulthood with a tendency to nurture and take care of others. These tendencies shape our communication when we are in our *Parent* ego state.

Your *Adult* ego state starts developing very early, as you begin to explore and experiment with situations. You learn ways to approach the solution of problems, to cope with harsh situations, to ask questions and make decisions. Some of us were raised in families and environments that reinforced this ego state. As a result, we are likely to habitually communicate more often from this ego state than others of us who didn’t receive that reinforcement.

Your *Child* ego state began developing even before you learned to speak, as you emotionally reacted to situations in your life. For example, if you were raised by non-restrictive, permissive parents and authority figures, you probably freely express your feelings in any situation, without censorship. If you were raised by very critical parents and authority figures, you learned either to adapt and conform to their rules, or you learned to be rebellious. These habitual behaviors learned very early in life strongly influence how you communicate your feelings.

Figure 2 contains some examples of what you might say when you are in each ego state.

**Figure 2**

**Examples Of Verbal Communication In Each Of The Three Ego States**

	<p><u>Critical Parent</u>            He looks ridiculous.            You should know better than that.            How dare you call me that!            That was disgusting!            You ought to be ashamed.</p>	<p><u>Nurturing Parent</u>            I love you, sweetheart.            You poor baby.            There, there—you’ll feel better.            Let me take care of you.            You are the sweetest little thing.</p>	
	<p>Where did you put the serving spoon?            So, what I hear you saying is...            Let’s see...if we take these steps, we can solve that problem.            Observe what I am about to do with this wrench.            If you pay the license fee, you can have this car.</p>		
	<p><u>Free Child</u>            That’s great!            I love it!            Wow!            Man-oh-man!            That’s sweet!</p>	<p><u>Adaptive Child</u>            See, I did it!            Look at me!            Did I do good?            Did I do it right?            I wish I was like you.</p>	<p><u>Rebellious Child</u>            I’ll show <i>you</i>!            Mine’s bigger!            In your dreams!            You think so, huh?            You can’t make me!</p>

These three ego states not only affect your choice of words. They also affect your *nonverbal behaviors*—your body language and the tone, pitch, and pace of your voice when you are speaking.

Figure 3 contains some examples of your nonverbal behaviors when you are in each ego state.

**Figure 3**

**Examples Of Nonverbal Communication In Each Of The Three Ego States**

	<u>Critical Parent</u> Threatening tone of voice Finger pointing Arms folded across your chest Sigh Turning your back and leaving	<u>Nurturing Parent</u> Comforting tone of voice Patting someone on shoulder Sympathetic smile Consoling sounds Hugging	
	 Curious expression with furrowed eyebrows Attentive body posture Even, thoughtful tone of voice Hand on chin and nodding head to show you are listening Quizzical, questioning look		
	<u>Free Child</u> Giggling Jumping up and down Frantic arm waving Loud, angry growl Loudly laughing	<u>Adaptive Child</u> Raising hand Downcast eyes Eager smile Whining tone of voice Quivering lips	<u>Rebellious Child</u> Taunting Nose thumbing Temper tantrum Sullen silence Needling

**Transactions**

Remember what I said in the beginning of this paper—a communication is a *transaction* between two people. From any of my three ego states, I could be directing my message at any of your three ego states, as shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5**

**Types Of Transactions Based On My Ego States**

Parent → Parent	Adult → Parent	Child → Parent
Parent → Adult	Adult → Adult	Child → Adult
Parent → Child	Adult → Child	Child → Child

Meanwhile, your response to me could come from any of your three ego states—the same one as me or a different one. We have thus engaged in a transaction. As you will see in a moment, which ego state each of us is in strongly influences the way we communicate. Different types of transactions are associated with different levels of communication difficulty. There are three types of transactions: *complimentary*; *crossed*; and *ulterior*. Let’s consider each.

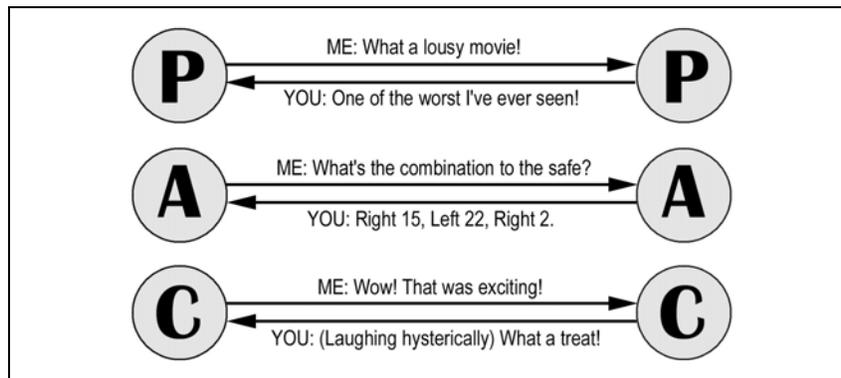
## Complementary Transactions

A complementary transaction is one in which the *sender* gets a response he or she expects from the *receiver*. This is a very open and easy communication.

Some complementary transactions are communications involving matching ego states, as illustrated in the three examples shown in Figure 6.

*Figure 6*

### Complementary Transactions Involving Matching Ego States

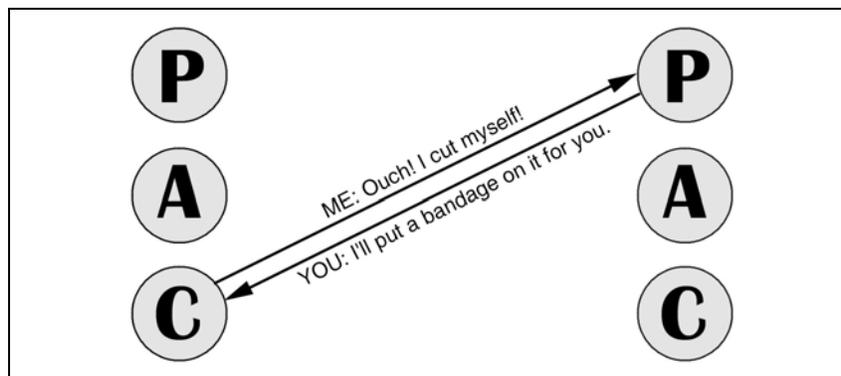


In the first example above, (*Parent* √ *Parent*) I, as the sender, am looking for agreement from you, the receiver, in my dislike for the movie. In the second example (*Adult* √ *Adult*), I am asking you for information. In the third example (*Child* √ *Child*) I am expressing a feeling that both you and I share. These complimentary transactions are open and uncomplicated.

Not all complimentary transactions involve the same ego states. Some complementary transactions involve different ego states that go with each other, as shown in the example in Figure 7, in which a message from the Child ego state is responded to from the Parent ego state.

*Figure 7*

### Complementary Transactions Involving Different Ego States



Again, these complimentary transactions are open and uncomplicated. I, as the sender, am getting back what I want from you, the receiver.

## Crossed Transactions

A crossed transaction is one in which the *sender* gets a different response than he or she expected from the *receiver*. This is a conflicting kind of communication, that often leads to misunderstandings,

hard feelings between people, or even withdrawal from each other. Figure 8 shows two examples of a crossed transaction.

**Figure 8**  
**Examples of Crossed Transactions**

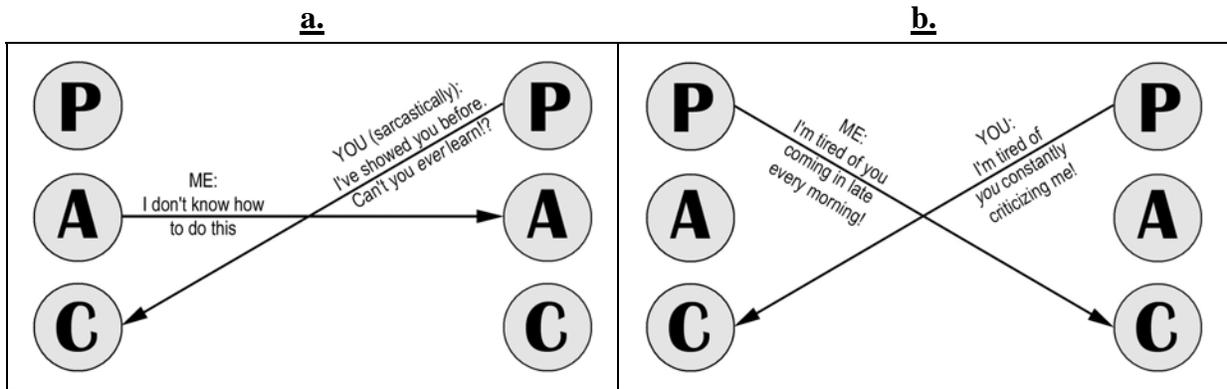
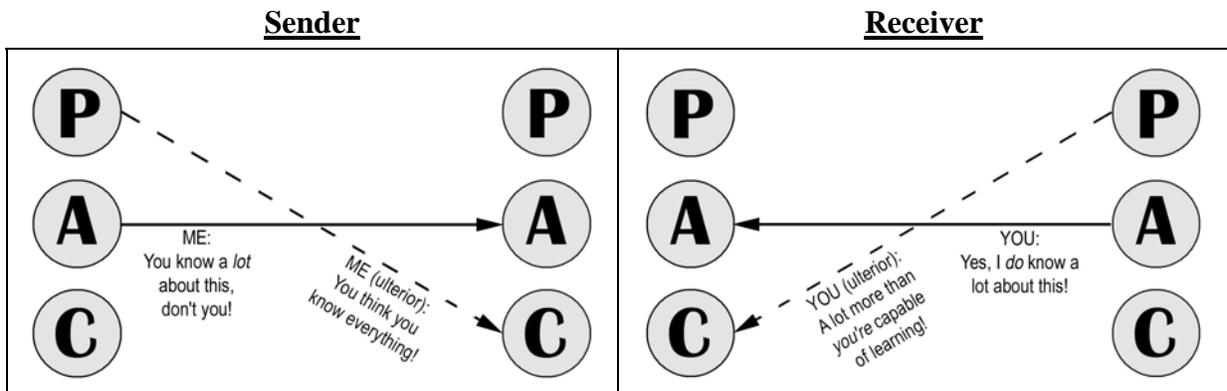


Figure 8.a illustrates a simple statement acknowledging that the sender doesn't know how to do something. In response, the receiver criticizes the sender for *not* knowing how. This can only increase the tension between the two. Figure 8.b illustrates a frustrated sender criticizing the receiver for his behavior. In response, the receiver criticizes the sender. It's a good illustration of how a sender can invoke defensive behavior from a receiver. This kind of crossed transaction escalates conflict in a transaction.

### Ulterior Transactions

Here's where it gets more complicated. An ulterior transaction is one in which either or both the send or receiver has an agenda—is sending a double message, as illustrated in Figure 9,

**Figure 9**  
**Examples of Ulterior Transactions**



The sender in Figure 9 is acknowledging that the receiver knows a lot about what they are doing, along with an ulterior, judgmental message (“You think you know everything!”). The receiver agrees with the sender’s statement, along with an ulterior, judgmental message (“A lot more than you will ever be capable of learning!”). These ulterior messages are usually transmitted nonverbally, with facial expressions, such as (in this case) a sneering smile.

## Achieving Constructive Transactions

Looking back at the above descriptions, you can see how communication becomes less constructive as we move from complementary transactions to crossed and ulterior transactions. In complementary transactions, communication is open and free of tension between the sender and receiver. In crossed and ulterior transactions, both participants are behaving defensively or critically, which raises the tension level and ultimately closes off constructive communication.

The key to achieving constructive transactions is to focus on *Adult to Adult* communication. When someone comes at you from their *Critical Parent*, respond from your *Adult* to their *Adult* to defuse the situation or from your *Nurturing Parent* to their *Child* if you sense that their criticalness is a result of feeling hurt.

In any conflict or tension-filled situation, practice staying in your *Adult* ego state. You will find yourself far more successful at “reading” others and solving problems.

# LIFE POSITIONS AND COMMUNICATION

Depending on the transactions that took place between you and your parents, authority figures, and other people as you were growing up, you now tend to occupy one of four *life positions* as an adult. Essentially, these four life positions are habitual ways you perceive and feel about yourself.

According to TA theorists, there are two ways to feel about yourself and another person:

**I'm OK**



**I'm Not OK**



**You're OK**

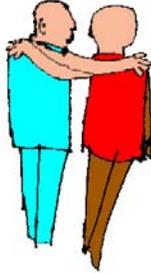


**You're Not OK**



Thus, our transactions come from four possible life positions, as shown in Figure 10.

**Figure 10**  
**The Four Life Positions**

	<b><u>You're OK</u></b>	<b><u>You're Not OK</u></b>
<b><u>I'm OK</u></b>	 <p>We both feel good about ourselves, confident, and constructive. I see us as equally OK.</p>	 <p>I feel confident and constructive about myself, but not you. I see you as "one down" from me.</p>
<b><u>I'm Not OK</u></b>	 <p>I see you as confident and constructive, but not me. I see myself as "one down" from you.</p>	 <p>I don't see either of us as confident and constructive. I see both of us as not OK.</p>

We may not be in the same life positions all of the time, depending on what is happening in our lives. But, we all typically lean to one of the four positions as we view ourselves and others.

The life position you are has a significant influence on how you communicate. Figure 11 displays some common communication styles for each position—*winner*, *one-up*, *one-down*, and *alienated*.

**Figure 11**  
**Common Communication Styles Associated With The Four Life Positions**

	<u><b>You're OK</b></u>	<u><b>You're Not OK</b></u>
<u><b>I'm OK</b></u>	<p><b>WINNER</b></p> <p>Open, Non-defensive Non-threatening Problem-Solving Mindset</p>	<p><b>ONE UP</b></p> <p>Defensive Condescending Blames Others <i>In Extreme Cases: Paranoid</i></p>
<u><b>I'm Not OK</b></u>	<p><b>ONE DOWN</b></p> <p>Shy, Easily Embarrassed Fearful Tries To Please Others</p>	<p><b>ALIENATED</b></p> <p>Withdrawn, Disengaged Hostile, Cynical Negative Opinions</p>

It's easy to see how these communication styles can affect a manager's behavior. For example, the first tendency for a manager communicating from the winner position is to see people as winners—responsible, competent, hard-working, honest, good work ethic, etc. This manager will encourage open, mutual problem-solving.

The first tendency for a manager communicating from the one-up position is to see people as losers—irresponsible, incompetent, lazy, dishonest, poor work ethic, etc. This manager will be authoritarian and figure that others could never do it as good as he or she can.

The first tendency for a manager communicating from the one-down position is to see people as better than he or she is—more competent, a harder worker, more honest, a better work ethic. This manager will be shy at confronting people and try to please them.

The first tendency for a manager communicating from the alienated position is to see everyone as pretty worthless, including themselves. This manager will be negative and unproductive in any situation.

Be constantly aware of your life position and how powerfully it affects your communication transactions. If you tend not to be in the winner cell of Figure 11, start working toward moving yourself into that cell!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following article will help you do so. Dahlke, Arnie (2015b). You Are What You Speak. Retrieved from: <http://www.arniedahlke.com/You%20Are%20What%20You%20Speak.pdf>