Escaping the Drama Triangle: Strategies for Successful Research Administration from the Psychology of Codependence

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Abstract: *The role of research administrator requires highly efficient and collaborative project management to develop competitive, compliant and properly targeted applications for sponsor support. When problems arise, stress and time pressures may lead to maladaptive forms of manipulation and micromanagement between research administrators and principal investigators that resemble dysfunctional, codependent relationships. Using Karpman's Drama Triangle (1968), this article describes the loss of independence and the cognitive bias that precede the development of codependent thinking and behavior in the workplace, particularly as it relates to research administration. Discussion includes the incidence of "helicopter parenting" and its potential application to research administrators' attempts at risk-averse project oversight and security. The remainder of the article provides suggestions for avoiding workplace codependence within the research office, including specific strategies for engaging with principal investigators with greater clarity, effectiveness and respectful collaboration.*

Keywords: *research administration, codependency, helicopter parenting, Karpman's Drama Triangle*

Navigating the Social Field of Research Administration

The role of research administrator has dramatically changed over the past two decades. Landen and McCallister (2002) foresaw profound changes in the field of research administration borne of rapidly advancing technology, sponsor emphasis on complex, problem-centered research, and ever increasing expectations for responsibility and accountability from all project stakeholders. While institutional assumptions and support for offices of research have struggled to contend with the reality of their daily work (Cole, 2008; Landen & McCallister, 2002), research administrators have capably pushed the field forward, using their skill and expanding knowledge to maximize sponsored funding, despite shrinking office resources and sponsor payouts.

Cole (2008) suggested that faculty and research administrators comprise a "living system" with strong interdependency on one another, and much potential for reformation and growth. Research administrators and their faculty cannot achieve their common goal of successful sponsorship absent their individual contributions to a successful process. Yet as opposed to faculty who focus on the essential subject matter of each funding request, research administrators dynamically shift

through a host of different roles and knowledge sets critical to the outcome of their work. Lehman (2017) observed that research administrators at times focus on an expansive set of legal, financial, and process information that they must fully understand to apply appropriately. At other times, research administrators rely on implicit knowledge and best practices that are garnered through experience and conveyed via the complex culture of research administration (Lehman, 2017).

Beyond the relatively simple skillsets that appear in research administrator job descriptions, like detail orientation and technology skills, every successful research administrator wields a toolbox of tacit skills that aid communication and expedite progress. These include the ability to instill confidence in an anxious, stalling principal investigator on deadline day, a communication style that directly addresses wrongdoing without shaming, and the sharp insight to accurately foresee a problem before it arises and resolve it.

An effective research administrator may shift between manipulation, intrusion, inspiration and vigilance. Ideally, they strive to respond to their colleagues with consistent clarity and respect. Nevertheless, when the time pressures and high-stakes outcomes common to the field intervene, research administrators are easily drawn into weakening their professional boundaries and allowing workplace conflicts with principal investigators to become personal affronts. Weak boundaries and enmeshment in other peoples' issues and problems can lead to inappropriate caretaking, or codependence, which in the workplace, can damage both relationships and professional outcomes (Alcorn, 1992; Larsen & Goodstein, 1993). Avoiding these situations requires personal clarity and an awareness of the dynamics in place (Wagner, 2015; Alcorn, 1992; Henley 2011), which can be difficult to recognize while in the heat of difficult situations.

Visualizing Research Administration on the Drama Triangle

Psychiatrist Stephen Karpman (1968) developed a model termed, The Drama Triangle, that diagrams how people in conflict think and behave in shifting, destructive ways. The model is used for everything from transactional therapy (Forrest, 2008; Zerin, 1988) to mapping dramatic scripts (Birk, 1994; Karpman, 1968;), but among its strengths is the model's ability to diagram toxic interaction, including the personal positions underlying codependency.

Figure 1. The Drama Triangle

Figure 1. The Drama Triangle. This diagram, illustrating the interrelation of three key roles in maladaptive communication, was developed by Stephen Karpman (1968).

The model has three revolving roles – victim, rescuer and persecutor. At the apex of the triangle is the "victim," – the "feel sorry for me" role that solicits assistance and sympathy from others. At their side is the rescuer, who faces conflict with the need to save the victim by control and manipulation. To their side is the persecutor who feels put upon, resentful, and angry about having to deal with the victim's problems.

As the arrows show, people dealing with conflict travel this triangle by assuming the various roles at different times in their own conflicted thinking and communication (Forrest, 2008). At times, several people in conflict with one another will act out the roles on the Drama Triangle as they struggle with a problem - like a principal investigator (victim), research administrator (rescuer), and college dean (persecutor) arguing about a large equipment purchase on a grant. At other times, individuals play out the roles on the Drama Triangle in response to their own shifting, emotional thinking about a problem, like a research administrator worrying, blaming, and fitfully recalculating as they struggle with a significant budget error on a submitted proposal. Accordingly, realizing when you are responding to a situation by "traveling the Drama Triangle" is an important first step toward reducing stress and working more efficiently.

Using Karpman's Drama Triangle and psychological theory regarding codependent behavior in the workplace, the author will help readers to visualize the blurring of effective boundaries between

research administrators, principal investigators and their project colleagues and illustrate the risk of negative impacts to their interrelating. Additionally, the article will provide strategic steps for recovering clarity, detaching from interpersonal matters, and resuming effective, respectful collaboration.

The Seduction and Sacrifices of Enmeshment

The fluid roles of research administrators – partner, authority, mentor, and coordinator – require some affinity for the people and projects they lead. It is commonly believed that cultivating professional friendships and mutual trust can improve the quality and effectiveness of work. Unfortunately, the same deeper understanding and empathy that helps research administrators sensitively push a project forward can create additional complexity and complicate stress.

Studies show that stress is a common component of the research administrator lifestyle (Shambrook, 2010; Shambrook, 2012). More than half of us are stressed at a level we perceive as "high" or "extremely high," as we struggle with work-life balance, and neglect of our own health through poor sleep, long hours and working while ill (Shambrook, 2012). High stress, coupled with a strong feeling of responsibility for all aspects of a job, even for those aspects that are out of a person's control can be problematic, particularly when it becomes habitual (Henley, 2011).

Arguably, one of the most important capabilities research administrators possess and manage throughout their careers is their ability to walk the tightrope between collaboratively co-managing very complicated projects with their principal investigators and becoming emotionally enmeshed with these projects and people, such that they lose the ability to see issues with independence and detachment. Because this behavior is reinforced by experience and supported by situational factors, anyone can fall into dysfunctional helping behavior (Alcorn 1992; Larsen & Goodstein, 1993; Wagner 2015). Letting stress, fear or insecurity prompt interference in the routine responsibilities of others or choosing to translate an impersonal conflict into a personal slight can elevate short-term frustrations into longer-term obstacles in anyone's working life. If these habits persevere, they can reinforce damage to working relationships, promote burnout, and even prematurely end careers (Alcorn, 1992; Larsen & Goodstein, 1993). At worst, enmeshed behavior can become habitual, leading to unmanageable and personal stress affecting home life and relationships (Alcorn, 1992; Larsen & Goodstein, 1993; Wagner 2015). Accordingly, learning to see the signs of emotional enmeshment with our principal investigators is among one of our most important abilities as research administrators, for those closest to us, and for the healthy longevity of our careers.

Attributional Bias As A Moderator Of Research Administrator Experience

Research administrators are expert knowledge managers with the ability to focus simultaneously on all the moving parts of a complex project: the principal investigator; the members of the team; the relation of the work to the sponsor's priorities; and the regulations, policies and requirements of all stakeholders. Research administrators recognize and support all of these assets, not for one project, but for all of the projects that overflow their "in" baskets, prepare for closeout, await

resubmission, and travel backward over the busy years of their individual careers.

Well-managed, successful grants and contracts can boost careers, elevate the reputation and success of the institution, and benefit the public good (Cole, 2008; Landen & McCallister, 2002). External funding advances fields of inquiry, promotes the survival of worthwhile programs, and keeps staff and students actively engaged and meaningfully employed. When proposals are declined or suffer serious compliance failures during implementation, all roles and resources are negatively impacted in ways that are difficult to fully assess. Failures in project launch, whether prior to submission, at the sponsor level, or cobbled post award, can be upsetting events for research administrators, especially if they feel some connection to the failure. Understanding how personal beliefs about situations, people, and events impact behavioral decisions is a first key to avoiding enmeshment.

Personal explanations of apparent successes and failures, including the outcomes of sponsored work, is an element of our attributional style; habitual, cognitive explanations for interpreting good and bad events, irrespective of their history or context (Higgins & Shaw, 1999; Peterson & Seligman, 1984; Riolli & Summer, 2010). These cognitive biases attach to individuals, and infect teams of colleagues through simple office discussion and interaction (Riolli & Summer, 2010). Those with a pessimistic attributional style – who blame themselves for negative outcomes and expect to experience similar failure in the future, can create a "shared mental model" of negativity through group interaction that results in team feelings of ineffectiveness, helplessness and negativity (Riolli & Summer, 2010)..

Negative Bias in Research Administration

The pressures of our interpersonal work as research administrators can easily contribute to the tendency to cultivate biased thinking. Attendees of the Society for Research Administration International (SRAI) meetings, who have engaged in the discussion sessions focused on creating better relationships with project principal investigators, may be surprised at how vividly a few negative interactions are remembered and remain a concern, even if they occurred years ago.

In reality, there are many valid reasons why principal investigators and their advocates may struggle to relate with research administrators. First, we arrive to each project with different priorities – principal investigators focus on the program or research described and the research administrator focuses on guidelines, protocol, compliance and process (Cole, 2008). Each of us speaks a different language, and owns a different part of the process. Not surprisingly, when experienced faculty were asked about the support research administrators should provide, faculty prioritized being more helpful and less focused on enforcing rules (Cole, 2008). Where there is misunderstanding and misalignment in priorities, frustration may lead to feelings of mistrust, which can manifest in controlling the sharing of information. Yet both parties are deeply committed to achieving the same all-important outcome - a successful, competitive proposal.

Where a pessimistic attributional bias continues unquestioned, the quality and persistence of work is impaired (Riolli & Sommer, 2010). Neutral situations, requiring questions rather than pre-judgement, are reinterpreted to fit an existing personal bias and explained as an intentional

fault or aggression. If research administrators see these conflicts as evidence of their insufficiencies or inability to manage challenging relationships, they may be hesitant to share their concerns with supervisors or colleagues who might question their choice to take situations personally or suggest alternative explanations. Believing the situation is intractable and beyond help, reinforces the research administrator's role as victim and facilitates a reactive response.

Codependency: The Research Administrator's Myth of Control

Many research administrators have stood at an impasse, working feverishly, late in the process, with a proposal that must go out and a principal investigator who is making excuses, is slow to respond, or is not producing work aligned with sponsor guidelines. Not wanting to face a failed process or take the time to untangle a troubled situation, the research administrator steps in and personally assumes project tasks, regardless of whose responsibility they are or whether they should. To facilitate tight deadlines, they may even choose to intercede in their principal investigators' work routinely. As the research administrator's regular duties sit untouched, they may rationalize their boundary-violating actions as examples of their excellent service orientation, and the means by which they earn faculty trust and demonstrate to all their indispensable value.

However, that may not be how the principal investigator sees it. They may be uncomfortable with the steps taken and view the overreach as intrusive; an infringement of their appropriate oversight and follow up. Alternatively, they may see the sacrifice as a glorious opportunity. If their research administrator is willing to do their work, why get in the way and assume responsibility for their own share of the effort? The research administrator may be shocked and angered by these responses, unsure why their sense of sacrifice was unappreciated by their principal investigator or so inappropriately used.

In the realm of popular psychology, this type of interaction is termed, codependency. This popular psychology term was originally developed by Melody Beattie (1989) to characterize the behavior of people engaged in deeply troubled relationships centering on a partner with addictions. Over time, the description of codependence has expanded to other types of toxic interactions including controlling workplace interactions (Alcorn, 1992; Larsen & Goldstein, 1993; Morkved, 2014), misguided entrepreneurial behavior (Wagner, 2015), and dysfunctional over parenting relationships (Caruso, 2019; Fingerman et al., 2012; Odenweller, 2014; Rousseau & Scharf, 2015; Rousseau & Scharf, 2018; Schiffrin, et al., 2014). In the codependent relationship, one person is compulsively, consistently, and at times, dramatically engaged in controlling and rescuing the other from their own age- and situation-appropriate responsibilities and consequences (Allcorn, 1992; Beattie, 1989; Burn, 201 5; Henley, 2011; Springer et al., 1998).

Interestingly, codependency, like other emotional and behavioral issues, occurs across a continuum - from those whose lives are deeply afflicted by these decisions and behaviors to those who exhibit this behavior only in certain situations and in response to certain persons (Alcorn, 1992; Larsen & Goldstein, 1993; Springer et al, 1998). Accordingly, researchers and practitioners contend that codependency is a pattern everyone experiences to at least some extent (Allcorn, 1992; Larsen & Goldstein, 1993; Wagner, 2005). Where codependent thinking predominates, there is greater likelihood that neutral stimuli will be interpreted inaccurately and skewed toward

codependent beliefs and chosen behavior (Allcorn, 1992; Larsen & Goldstein, 1993). As this behavior continues, boundaries are seriously blurred and the person providing all the unrequested assistance and interference loses track of their own needs and responsibilities (Allcorn, 1992; Beattie, 1989; Burn, 2015; Henley, 2011; Springer et al.,1998). Though persons dealing with codependence may realize the futility of trying to control another's behavior and consequences, their efforts at control continue (Beattie, 1989; Alcorn, 1992; Larsen & Goldstein, 1993). Over time, codependent behavior can become so compulsive that unrelenting "helping" extends beyond the original troubled relationship and situation to other important people in the rescuer's life, who neither need nor request support (Allcorn, 1992; Burn, 2015; Henley, 2011; Springer et al.,1998).

As expected, these boundary violations are not well perceived by many colleagues and where they are supported, there is much room for the codependent employee to be misused and disrespected by others (Allcorn, 1992). Because of all the additional work they assume, many codependents are consistently anxious, stressed and plagued by feelings of overwork, further complicated by their own neglected assignments and unnecessarily complicated responsibilities (Allcorn, 1992; Burn, 2015; Henley, 2011; Larsen & Goldstein, 1993; Pisor, 2015). Because they feel excessive responsibility for everyone's outcomes, employees contending with codependency are prone to painful guilt when their feverish work does not result in success. Their world feels controlled by outside forces which they try their best to manage and appease (Allcorn, 1992). As a consequence of their impaired state, they are subject to excessive denial of the reality of their situation, and prone to depression and burnout (Allcorn, 1992; Lancer, 2018; Larsen & Goldstein, 1993; Pisor, 2015).

How Codependency Places Research Administrators on the Drama Triangle

Understanding how codependent thinking and behavior affects research administrators is important to avoiding these problems. Returning to Karpman's Drama Triangle (1968) it is clear that irrespective of which role a person holds in a codependent relationship, there is suffering; the rescuer and persecutor are just two different extremes of victimhood (Forrest, 2008). Rescuers see themselves as superior to the victim because they firmly believe that they have accurately identified the victim's problem and are on their way to solving it singlehandedly, despite its impacts on them personally and professionally. The persecutor also feels superior to the victim because this role identifies as a mistreated person who knows better than to act, think or perform like the victim. Therefore, the persecutor is impacted by stress, animosity and resentment (Forrest, 2008).

When perceived conflict arises, each person enters the Drama Triangle at a "starting gate"– the position (rescuer, victim, persecutor) that is emotionally triggered for them by their prior experiences with conflict, perhaps going all the way back to childhood (Forrest, 2008). Then once they begin interacting on the Drama Triangle, people move from position to position trying to determine their way out, but usually end up intractably in the role of victim (Forrest, 2008).

What would working on the Drama Triangle look like for research administrators? The diagram below (Figure 2) is based on Karpman's Drama Triangle (1968) but is modified to illustrate how

the roles of victim, rescuer and persecutor might function and interrelate in an office of research.

First, note that the catalyst is a "problem" incoming at the center of the diagram. None of the roles dialogue about analyzing the situation or determining whether it needs immediate action. Instead, all victim roles are ready with a characteristic response. The title, the *De-Activation Triangle*, underscores how this chaotic approach activates emotional reactivity, rather than a logical, fact-based approach to issues.

Figure 2. The Research Administration De-activation Triangle

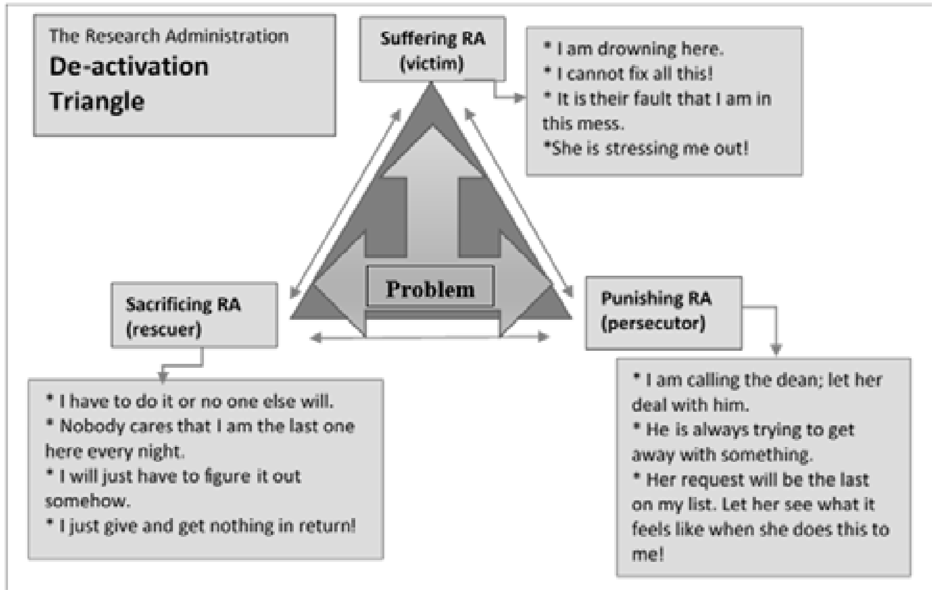


Figure 2. The Research Administration De-activation Triangle. Based on the work on Stephen Karpman (1968), this diagram provides examples of how the research administration roles of victim, rescuer and persecutor might assess information and interrelate when a perceived problem arises in a busy research office.

Applying these tenets to the field of research administration makes this behavior easier to recognize in the workplace. We know the colleague who eats her lunch at her desk all week and stays later at work in the evening, even on non-deadline days, because she believes she "should" or "must." We work with a colleague who is always short on time, but routinely assumes the work of his principal investigators because "they can't do it themselves" or because his principal investigators "expect it." We feel sorry for an anxious, tired and contentious colleague who fears every negative service review, proposal denial, or post award issue because she never feels truly secure in her abilities or position. Perhaps from time to time, we are these colleagues.

The literature specifies some particular types of codependent tendencies that manifest in the workplace (Larsen & Goldstein, 1993). These include: *Caretakers* who struggle to maintain

control by solving other people's problems and controlling how others work; *People Pleasers* who are loathe to ever say no and are motivated to remove the risk of conflict; *Martyrs* who are subject to worry and guilt and act based on their negative worldview; *Perfectionists* who may suffer from low self-esteem and take mistakes very personally, while holding others to their impossibly high standards; and *Workaholics* who are generally rewarded by institutions for their appearance of commitment, while they hide behind a veil of unfocused busyness (Larsen & Goldstein, 1993). While categorical types help us to recognize these behaviors more readily, we benefit most from seeing how these thought patterns and motivations can pull research administrators and principle investigators off task and in conflict with the urgent and sometimes, confrontational work of developing and supporting sponsored work.

In contrast, Allcorn (1992) identified the "faces" behind codependent tendencies that spur people to focus unwaveringly on some aspect of their work life that is very difficult to secure – the myth of absolute control, perfection and protection from all errors, alleviation of difficult conflicts, and protection from being revealed as weak or incapable (Alcorn, 1992). To meet these needs, codependent employees will assume extra work willingly and put previously assigned responsibilities in jeopardy. They deny their own feelings until small upsets become explosive. They ask nothing for themselves, but have deep-seated expectations to be likewise, rescued, protected and supported by their colleagues. Common failure to achieve these outcomes further depletes their weak self-esteem and self-efficacy (Allcorn, 1992), making stressful work and situations more difficult to overcome.

Does this mean that research administrators are never privileged to overstep the routine bounds of their positions to steer difficult projects to success? Is gatekeeping and vigorous project support always a threat for codependent action? Daire et al. (2012) noted that "emotional overinvesting" occurs when attachment to a particular need or outcome increases, while attachments to other outcomes and needs decrease. This narrowing of focus and energy, particularly when accompanied by controlling, manipulation, and people pleasing are warning signs of maladaptive overinvesting (Daire et al., 2012). This description of enmeshment suggests a deeply different scenario from pulling a project to the finish line along with other qualified roles.

Before a research administrator assumes a task that is ordinarily handled by a principal investigator, the key to determining whether that boundary violation is problematic or appropriate for the situation is taking the time to consider why that course of action is necessary. *In Codependency: The Helping Problem*, Lee (2018) suggested that individuals who feel at risk for codependent actions should ask themselves some key questions before taking action. These questions include: *Do you feel mean saying 'no'? Do find yourself consistently resentful when other do not put in as much effort as you? Do you often find yourself in the 'savior' role?* (Lee, 2018). Taking on additional responsibility to influence someone, seek some action in kind, or to alleviate problems for someone else are all questionable motivations, in the absence of better intentions. Given our deep awareness of all the different aspects that support project success, it is sometimes necessary to decline a request for direct support from a principal investigator and instead focus on enabling their own knowledge and abilities to assume a task themselves while fostering their independence. This is a goal completely foreign to persons who think and act codependently, while wishing to be

everyone's oracle and savior. Sometimes it is better to empower others to perform work delegated to them, so in your role as research administrator you are free to pursue work that only you have the understanding and training to complete.

Our field has a service orientation that rewards "going the extra mile" for our principal investigators, especially for those whose full collaboration we have yet to win. A similar argument has been made in the literature declaring that codependent behavior is gender-specific and in fact represents social ideals of feminine care and support (Dear & Roberts, 2002). Though males and females do not differ significantly in their degree of codependent behavior (Lee, 2018; Springer et al., 1998), codependent characteristics are sometimes described in positive, stereotypically feminine terms – such as expressing empathy, nurturing others, and demonstrating self-sacrifice for the good of others (Dear & Roberts, 2002). From this perspective, overreaching and navigating across professional boundaries could be considered as nothing more than a commendable, client service orientation. Experienced research administrators are keenly aware of the stresses of grantsmanship and the necessary commitment to drop all other actions and attend to the investigator in need. The difficulty is in offering the right kinds of assistance where and when appropriately needed, while maintaining a professional, and appropriately detached position from principal investigators and proposals. This demeanor, which seems impersonal and uncaring from a codependent perspective, is actually the stable, unclouded perspective with the best likelihood of reviewing situations with clarity and objectivity, leading to an appropriate and useful level of support.

"Helicopter Parenting" Project Success And Compliance

Though the broad terminology of codependency has fallen out of favor in segments of the psychology community (Dear & Roberts, 2002), new terminology has become commonplace to describe codependent behavior specific to particular types of relationships and circumstances. Among these is the term "helicopter parenting" – described as the "use of developmentally inappropriate forms of involvement, control, and problem-solving" to spirit children of any age toward success at various milestones or tasks (Rousseau & Scharf, 2018). Helicopter parents are overprotective and overzealous communicators, who interfere in their children's personal matters, usurp their decision-making, and make unreasonable investments in their success, while freeing their pathway of ordinary obstacles (Odenweller, et al, 2014). As opposed to the maladaptive and contentious relationships common in codependency, helicopter parents often enjoy positive, loving relationships with their young offspring (Schiffrin, et al, 2014). In early childhood, helicopter parenting is associated with a host of positive outcomes for their children, including healthy development and prosocial behavior, but as children approach adolescence, this parenting approach becomes more likely to cause harm (Schiffrin, et al, 2014).

Though there are certainly articles describing the perils of codependent bosses and colleagues (Burns, 2015; Henley, 2011; Morkved, 2014; Pisor, 2015; Robertson, 2018), descriptions of "helicopter bosses" and "helicopter managers" (Grant, 2013; Rao, 2016) seem more in line with the primarily positive, but potentially, overreaching relationships research administrators form with principal investigators. Rao (2016) described helicopter bosses as well-intentioned autocrats

who micromanage their employees, interfere in their work, discourage new approaches and innovative plans, and distrust their employee's abilities. Do the stresses of grantsmanship and the principal investigators that cannot, or will not, comply with urgent needs transform logical, independent research administrators into hovering "helicopter project managers?"

There are certainly useful parallels between anxious parents and anxious research administrators. Studies have shown that helicopter parents are more risk averse than adults with more normative parenting styles (Rousseau & Scharf, 2018). They lack confidence in their children's efficacy and mistrust their children's ability to follow up appropriately. Helicopter parents experience unusual fear and/or anxiety about their children's outcomes, act from a prevention-focused position toward security, safety and compliance, and protect themselves and their children from difficulties, failure, negative outcomes and the perception of incompetence (Rousseau & Scharf, 2018).

The comparison seems odd when balancing children against brilliant and competent principal investigators, yet research administrators may feel like parents struggling to convey their wisdom to their disinterested offspring. Research suggests that faculty see the requirements and regulations of sponsored research as impediments to their work (Cole, 2008). In contrast, staff in sponsored programs offices are much more aware of the serious and costly risks that can arise from poor project planning and follow through. So at times, research administrators engage in vigorous due diligence and ask repeated, difficult questions to make sure that matters of importance will not be missed. Though the research administrator sees these actions as protective and supportive, the experience for a frustrated faculty member may be insulting and restrictive. Then just as an adult striving for autonomy under a hovering parent, principal investigators can grow weary of the protracted permission process, followed by exhaustive oversight, and begin to navigate around the sponsored program office.

Addressing Problems of Codependency and Hovering: Preparing for Respectful Collaboration

The following suggestions for counteracting codependent workplace behaviors are based on the work of Seth Alcorn (1992), Earnie Larsen and Jeanette Goodstein (1993) and Melody Beattie (1989) and are adapted to the specific parameters of research administration. Emphasis is placed on three important levels of decision-making and action: the institution; the workgroup; and the individual.

Addressing the Problems of Codependency and Hovering: Fostering Institutional Collaboration

Two of the key factors that lead people to respond to stressful circumstances codependently are a lack of institutional safety and boundaries (Allcorn, 1992). For research administrators, institutional safety requires a firm set of policies governing how projects are handled at submission, award and implementation, a process for integrating regular administrative duties

with unanticipated, moment to moment deadlines, and staffing policies that provide enough cross-training and potential for reallocating time to meet high demand situations capably and reliably. These plans foster teamwork over less efficient, self-sacrifice.

The ability to rely on institutional rules and processes for particular types of requests serves everyone by setting expectations for success. When protocols are understood and reiterated uniformly by everyone, there is little opportunity for principal investigators to claim they are unaware and rationalize their own passing lane around the sponsored research office.

Then there are the physical boundaries – effective workspaces that allow people to focus on their work, to secure quiet when needed, and to engage in open conversation with their principal investigators and stakeholders without disrupting others. Even relatively commonplace considerations, like a stable, protected desk space and individualized computing, can help to reinforce a feeling of independence and provide the security and convenience to easily locate needed resources.

Addressing the Problems of Codependency and Hovering: Fostering Interpersonal Collaboration

Larsen and Goldstein (1993) emphasized the following qualities that lead to professional success: *loyalty; motivation for success; willingness to improve; and personal responsibility.* Each provides a useful standard for professionalism in the field of research administration.

Loyalty is a shared commitment to the mission, goals and objectives of the organization (Larsen and Goldstein, 1993). In research administration, staff uniformly share a commitment to facilitating the growth of principal investigators. Devising useful and effective professional development supports responsible project stewardship and helps research administrators facilitate a transparent process.

Motivation for success provides the intention of the research office; a way of doing work that achieves shared outcomes and puts interpersonal insecurities that move staff toward hovering, controlling and overstepping outside of priorities. Each research administrator needs to plan their own toolkit for success – one that reduces stress, celebrates outcomes and prompts detachment from conflict. Exercise, hobbies, relaxation, and a positive social network are all healthy buffers for maintaining forward progress.

Willingness to improve is an asset that compliments the dynamic, every-changing nature of research administration. Just as sponsor guidelines, programs and policies are forever in a state of flux, flexibility in welcoming new situations and challenges enhances working life. Striving for perfection and fearing the appearance of inexperience makes staff less able to handle these new situations – but a desire to grow professionally invites a positive challenge.

Personal responsibility encourages administrators to share issues openly for group discussion and resolutions that foster group productivity and success. Fortunately, the same open sharing that helps to produce better plans and policies also counteracts the anxious, sequestering of information common to codependent thinking.

Addressing the Problems of Codependency and Hovering: Fostering Individual Success

Melody Beattie, the best-selling author who introduced the world to the concept of codependency in her book, *Codependent No More*, specified *Core Symptoms* over which people struggling with codependency can feel powerless (1989). Reviewing these symptoms raises awareness of the situational and emotional states that reinforce feelings of powerlessness and a need to take action - any action - to gain control of a situation that feels out of control. Based on Beattie's book, *Breaking Free: A Recovery Workbook for Facing Codependence* (1989) the list of personal priorities below suggest how to recapture personal strength when the work of research administration feels overwhelming.

Level Your Self-Esteem

Though importance and self-worth are not externally determined, reminders of past successes reinforce continued effort and growth. Keep positive emails commending a job well done, letters of thanks and statistics for awards received within easy access.

Set Strong Boundaries

Setting boundaries on available resources raises awareness of their limits. Plan the day, even if disruptions are anticipated, and be selective about which and how many unanticipated needs integrate into the schedule.

Own Your Now

When applications are flying, it is easy to become disengaged from feelings and perspective in the moment. Checking in with emotions, and the ideas that prompted them, provides a path to stability and calmer processing.

Decipher Needs from Wants

When hovering over situations and trying to keep control, delegating work or waiting for a more convenient time seems impossible. Yet the ability to let go of assumptions and an unfair, unattainable, version of our professional selves are the first steps toward a more effective, and less stressed productivity.

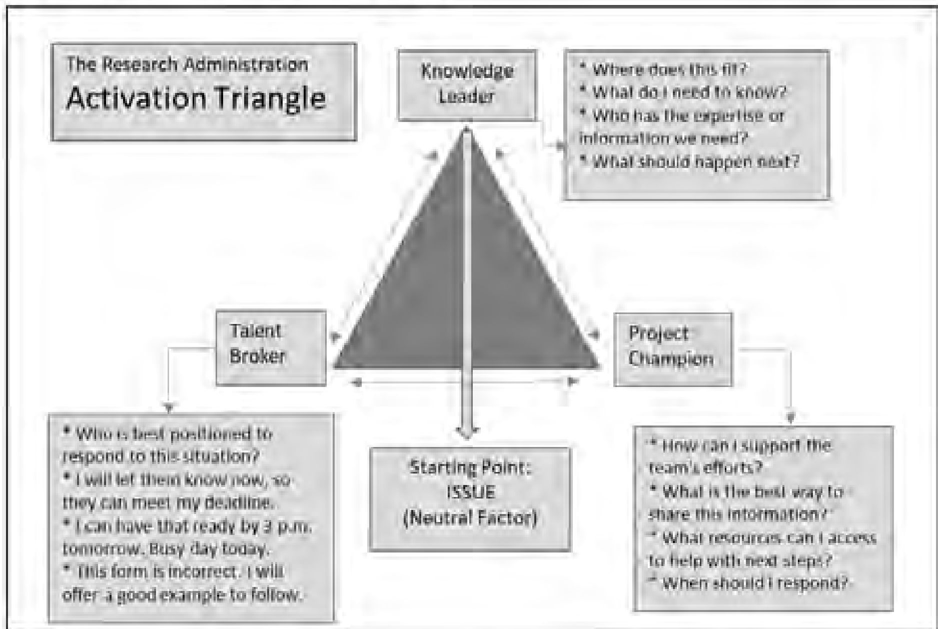
Addressing Problems of Codependency and Hovering: Revisiting the Drama Triangle

In Figure 1, a review of Karpman's Drama Triangle (1968) provided readers with a visual representation of how people engaged in toxic interrelations think and communicate. The thought patterns and behaviors of these roles closely mirror the codependent relationship, complete with a voice relevant to the roles of victim, rescuer and persecutor. The Drama Triangle was then redrawn into a *De-activation Triangle* (Figure 2) that mirrored how these types of victims might think and interrelate within a busy research office. Processing was focused internally, (ie. "How will this problem affect me?") rather than on the identification of the issue and the planning of an appropriate resolution.

The diagram in Figure 3, the *Activation Triangle*, represents a reinterpretation of the three roles into their more collaborative, cognitively independent counterparts. In this format, each role is motivated by curiosity to understand a new, incoming issue and externalize processing to determine which office resources and what schedule is most appropriate for follow up. Each role on the *Activation Triangle* translates into its functional opposite when compared with the prior figures. The descriptions of each role, below, provide useful examples of collaborative, independent thinking that can reduce stress and promote efficiency.

Figure 3

The Research Administration Activation Triangle



Note. Based on Karpman's Drama Triangle (1968), this diagram translates the roles of victim, rescuer, and persecutor into their functional opposites within an active research office.

The shift from Suffering RA (Victim) to Knowledge Leader (KL)

The cornerstone of the victim role is deficiency; they believe themselves incapable of solving problems, and see themselves as too weak, fragile or ignorant to manage. Nonetheless, they are deeply resentful of those who come to their rescue (Forrest, 2008).

On the Activation Triangle, the Suffering Research Administrator (Victim) is transformed into a Knowledge Leader (KL) who symbolizes the first cognitive and behavioral approach to any new issue that arises. The KL sees a lack of information as an external issue, not a personal shortcoming. The KL questions what data are missing and who has the needed expertise to strengthen the KL's

understanding of the issue. Focus is on identification, understanding and next steps.

The transition from Sacrificing RA (Rescuer) to Talent Broker

For the sacrificial research administrator, successfully addressing any situation is a lesser priority than earning others' gratitude, recognition, and eventual reciprocation, for their seemingly selfless acts (Forrest, 2008).

On the Activation Triangle, the Sacrificing RA evolves into a Talent Broker (TB) who approaches issues by choosing staff with whom to collaborate or helping key roles feel competent and confident while successfully moving forward. TBs set expectations for responding, and provide resources to empower learning, professional growth and independence.

The shift from Punishing RA (Persecutor) to Project Champion

The Punishing Research Administrator needs someone to attack when things go wrong. They believe they can do no wrong themselves, and are generous with their blame, threats, lectures and retribution (Forrest, 2008).

In contrast, the Punishing RA finds their strength as a Project Champion (PC) on the Activation Triangle. As asset manager, the PC focuses on improving the delivery, quality, and value of resources provided by the office of research to the project and its team. Consequently, the PC becomes a valued and trusted collaborator, rather than a disruptive, outside influence.

Conclusion

The role of research administrator requires an unusual set of skills and competencies, including the emotional intelligence to navigate an ever-changing landscape of complicated projects and people. The belief that interpersonal acrimony is just an unavoidable fixture of the profession is inaccurate. Emotionally detached, rewarding investment in our principal investigators' projects is possible and preferred. Further, research administrators can do much to determine how frequently they travel the Drama Triangle and visit its uncomfortable points of victimhood. Each thwarted journey on the Drama Triangle begins with awareness of the risk and appropriately, ends with us.

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