

# Leadership Programme

## Ego States

A powerful insight into the psychology of the Four Gears and a practical way to increase your leadership effectiveness.

One of the most powerful influences on our behaviour as human beings is the simple process of reciprocity. Each time we behave, we invite a response from other people.

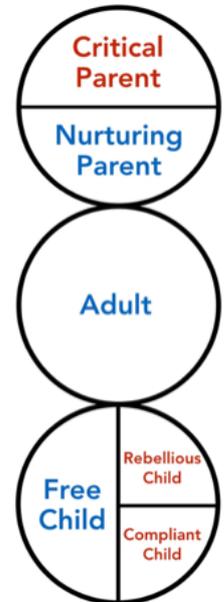
Learning about Ego States will help you to manage this process so that you increase the chances of getting the responses from people that you want. There are no guarantees of course, but it is our experience that applying the model works well enough to yield real results.

Transactional Analysis (TA) suggests that, as human beings, we each engage in six basic states of behaviour. These states comprise characteristic behaviours that we can recognise in others and ourselves. Each of these ways of responding is called an Egostate. Three Egostates involve our feelings (the Child Ego States); one involves pure thinking, facts and logic (the Adult Egostate) and two involve judgements, values and beliefs (the Parent Ego States).

### The Child Egostates

Young children express their emotions freely - when they are happy, they smile, laugh, dance, skip or play. When they are sad, they cry. There is a direct relationship between how they feel and what they express. In TA, the expression of feelings comes from the Child Egostate. Note that the term 'Child' does not denote age or status and is not about being 'childish'. When we express our feelings freely and openly, we are said to be engaging in the **Free Child** Egostate. We are also in this state when we are being authentic – when we are openly and honestly expressing our needs, our wants, when we are relying on our instincts, or when we are being creative.

As we grow up we come to learn that, to get by in life, we need to fit in with other people and comply with demands of our parents or primary caregivers. To do this we need to adapt our behaviour. In particular, we learn that it is not always smart to be open with our feelings; that, sometimes it may be wise to keep our mouths shut and comply and, at other times, it may be smarter to fight back or rebel.



Sometimes in life we adapt our real emotions and so in addition to **Free Child** there is 'Adapted Child'. It has two positions: either **Compliant Child**, which involves giving way to others (e.g. apologising, giving in, agreeing even when we don't), or **Rebellious Child**, where we mount a fight back (e.g. being aggressive, belligerent, defensive or resistant).

Our early experience and learning can shape our behaviour in powerful ways and it may be that we now behave in ways that are counter-productive and need changing.

## **The Adult Egostate**

In contrast to the emotional state, there are other times when we are concerned with engaging the brain and operating at a more rational and logical level. In the model, when we are focused on logic, facts, data, rational argument and debate, we are engaged in the **Adult** Egostate. It is the sender and receiver of factual information; it is non-judgemental and unemotional. The **Adult** state begins to develop between ages one and three and continues to develop throughout our lives.

## **The Parent Egostates**

As we grow up, we become aware that those around us make social judgements about how people behave. We receive powerful messages from our parents or primary caregivers about social values and rules. Over time, we gradually absorb some of their values and beliefs. Imagine our brain operating like a hard drive, activated when we were born, on which is saved all the do's and don'ts, musts, oughts, goods and bads we hear from our parents. It's not surprising we sometimes catch ourselves sounding just like our mother or father.

The Parent Egostate is subdivided into the **Nurturing Parent** and the **Critical Parent**. The **Nurturing Parent** is the part of us that is empathic, interested and respectful of others and supportive. Because it is the part of us that cares, that wants the best for someone **Nurturing Parent** is also the state in which we set clear boundaries for others to ensure that they perform effectively.

The **Critical Parent** is active at those times when we impose our judgements of what is right and proper onto others and when we talk about what others 'should' or 'ought' to do as we see it. **Critical Parent** uses opinion rather than fact, most likely telling people what they have done wrong. **Critical Parent** can take the form of judgemental, aggressive, sarcastic or controlling behaviour. It is often accompanied by a blaming tone, directed at the person directly such as 'You shouldn't have done that' or 'You never listen'.

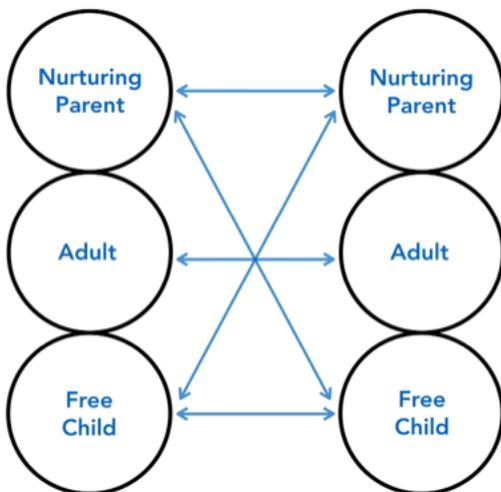
## **Effective vs Ineffective States**

TA provides a clear blueprint for effective, goal-oriented behaviour, suggesting that the Blue states (**Nurturing Parent**, **Adult** and **Free Child**) are the effective Egostates, and the Red states (**Critical Parent**, **Rebellious Child**, **Compliant Child**) are ineffective. The term 'effective' simply means that engaging in these behaviours makes it more likely you will achieve your goals in a way that is sustainable. Engaging in the blue, effective states you are more likely to invite a reciprocal, blue response. Similarly if you are perceived as behaving in the ineffective, red Egostates you will almost certainly 'hook' a red response.

It is true that the red state behaviours can produce quick results. However, as a style of interacting with people, overtime the red states are guaranteed to give rise to resentment, irritation, de-motivation or loss of credibility.

## Egostates, Interaction and Reciprocity

Every time you interact with someone, you send out an invitation for them to reply. As a general rule, the effective (blue) Egostates invite a response from other effective Egostates. You will often find yourself doing this naturally, for example:



- If someone looks upset, we might ask how they feel (Nurturing Parent, inviting their Free Child)
- If you want to solve a problem, you may tell others what you think, and ask them their opinion (Adult inviting Adult)
- If you want to lighten the mood, you may tell a joke or make a funny remark (Free Child invites Free Child)

This process plays out in every single interaction between two or more people. It works most of the time.

In the same way, there is a powerful 'hook' from one ineffective (red) Egostate to another. For example, if you are hostile or critical towards someone (Critical Parent), you are likely to get a defensive response back (Rebellious Child) or run the risk that the other person just goes along with you (Compliant Child).

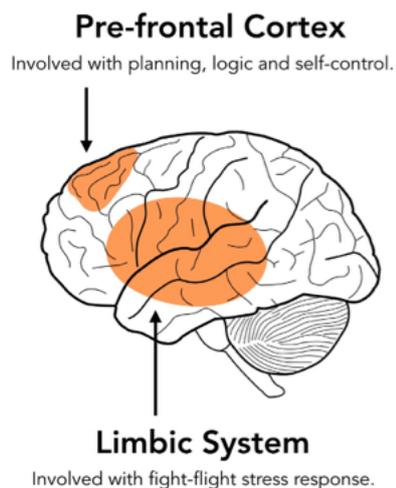
A submissive response may change dramatically when your back is turned – they may well flip into rebellion ("How dare she talk to me like that!"; "Who does he think he is?"). How many times have you seen this happen in a meeting: people outwardly go along with the boss and agree to a suggestion, but, as soon as they leave the room, they criticise or dismiss the idea? For this reason, we often consider Compliant Child and Rebellious Child as two sides of the same coin.

So it's simple, all we have to do is stay in the effective Egostates - listen to others, understand them, discuss the facts with them and express how we feel and we'll get the same back in return. We all know it's not as easy as that.

The times we find this most difficult are when we are under pressure, often faced with a challenge or a threat. In these 'flight' or 'fight' reactive situations where our body chemistry changes, we are pulled to behave in the red states. The true test of your leadership isn't just what you do to lead your people through those tough times, but how you do it. So, let's consider how our good intentions change when we are under pressure, as well as what to do to stay effective.

## Threat and the impact of 'fight' and 'flight'

Imagine that you have been called in to see your boss: you can see through that glass panel that she is not in a good mood. You go in: the meeting doesn't get off to a good start and she starts to raise her voice. You've apparently made a mistake, a big mistake. She leans towards you and she's looking at you intently. She explains it again, using a slower speed this time. As you realise the impact and consequences of the mistake, and indeed, whether you did make one, your body is likely to be releasing adrenaline: the 'fight and flight' hormone.



Even with impressive self-awareness, to deal well with this situation means controlling and defying your body. Adrenaline secreted in the pancreas is released when our brain sends signals that we are under threat. This hard wiring is our Stone Age legacy, in those days very useful for dealing with sabre tooth tigers and the like. Today's threats can range from a near miss in the car, to a conflict with a colleague or a critical incident at work.

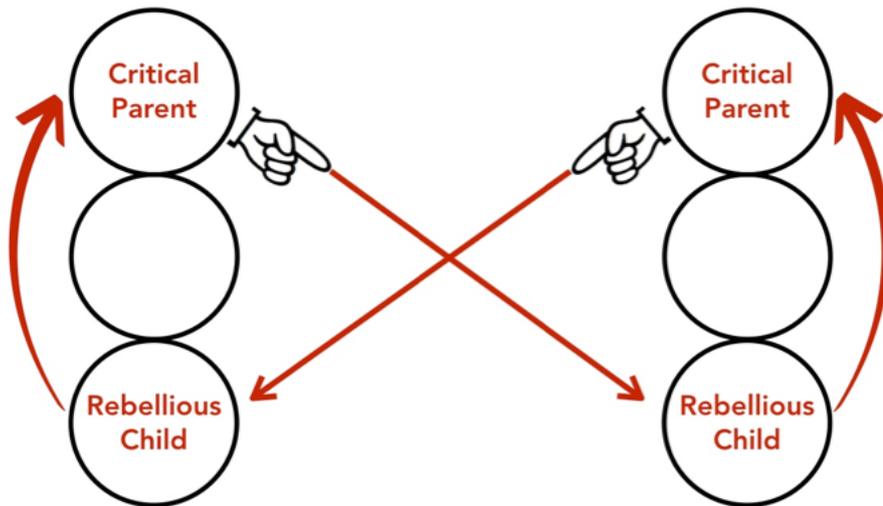
Adrenaline causes us to switch to physiological autopilot. We do not think, we react: our heart races, breathing rate speeds up, we get butterflies as blood is directed to our muscles away from our stomachs, and a host of other bodily reactions you'll be familiar with.

We react in one of two ways depending partly on the situation and partly on who we are as people. We either 'fight' back or 'flight', so run away or freeze. Fighting means we square up to the threat, our body language is aggressive, tone of voice louder and we certainly don't explain how we are feeling. We are in 'telling' mode. To an observer this will seem like either **Critical Parent** or **Rebellious Child** behaviour. Conversely in 'flight' or 'freeze' we make ourselves as inconspicuous as possible, we are quieter, withdrawn, even submissive. We want to get out of there ASAP and so will agree to make it go away. This is a description of the **Compliant Child** Egostate. The effective Egostates are nowhere to be seen.

If we let our hardwiring rule and we carry on down this path, we will receive similar ineffective Egostates back from others in response. We will not be taken seriously or properly heard and we will not reach the optimum outcome. Overriding our hard wiring requires us to think. We need to get back to the **Adult** Egostate and work out what to do. Because the cortex, the thinking part of our brain, is momentarily unavailable, we have to wait for the pathways to respond (current research suggests a few seconds). In that time we can create a diversion by stalling (asking for clarification or repetition), breathing evenly and deliberately relaxing our muscles to offset the physiological effects, then gradually try to focus and think about our options. From this position we are more likely to be able to employ the effective ego states.

## Interpersonal Conflict

It is not uncommon in life for people to develop a pattern of behaving towards each other in which the ineffective Egostates are dominant. In organisations we may see one party criticising or blaming another which soon attracts an ineffective response back and before too long a well-worn path becomes established. We call this a Conflict Loop and over time it is dysfunctional. Leaders need to identify where these conflict loops exist and take responsibility for realigning the nature of the interactions.



### An example of a conflict loop

Steve was Head of Operations in a large engineering company designing and building state of the art machines. The new product was behind schedule and his team under huge pressure but things kept going wrong. Steve was in constant conflict with his team.

- Steve: What news have you got for me this morning? Don't tell me the software hasn't been written and the plinth casting still hasn't arrived
- Team: nods all round: no-one spoke
- Steve: Well for Pete's sake do something about it guys (said loudly and aggressively). I want to hear from all of you what you are doing to solve and prevent these issues (said slowly where he stared in turn at his team)
- Bill: Well as you know Steve it's not my fault that the software hasn't been written as I'm waiting on Jim's guys to do the design spec
- Jim (jumping in): hey Bill that's not fair: Steve's moved half my workforce onto the new machine design and I have other priorities. (Turning to Steve) So Steve if you just give me my guys back I can get this work done for Bill

- ↪ Steve: Why can't you people take some responsibility and sort it out for yourselves. If you're going to behave like kids I'll treat you like kids (said loudly, shaking his head)
- ↪ Team: sat initially in silence
- ↪ Jim: this is ridiculous. Steve if you took our manpower and supplier issues up more strongly at SM level then we'd see some change around here
- ↪ Steve: (banging his fist down on the table) I'm sick of you guys blaming me and each other, just get on and do it
- ↪ Team: silent
- ↪ Steve: OK (calmer now) moving onto other issues...

This organisation actually produces very high quality products but on the day we were there it was hard to believe after witnessing this conflict, classically characterised by everyone blaming everyone else. What happened here was that Steve, who under pressure had been aloof and worried for some weeks, was being perceived as **Critical Parent** by his team.

Each **CP** jibe is met with either **CC** or overt **RC** where they kick back, make excuses and blame others. What makes the loop complete are the **CP** comments turned on Steve. Each side of a conflict loop is an **RC** reaction with a **CP** push back. Each person is doing this, the temperature goes up and nothing productive gets done.

We frequently ask our clients what they'd need to do to manage this type of situation more effectively: almost everyone says they'd use the **Adult** Egostate – state the facts, be logical. And for most people that is what they do: they keep stating the facts. Only it doesn't sound or look like the facts to the recipient. The gaze has become more intent, the tone of voice more strident, the body posture may be tipping them further forward and they may be looking redder in the face. They are seeping emotion but as it's not expressed through the **Free Child** this comes across as **Critical Parent**. It sounds and looks like someone is telling them what to do and not listening and so inadvertently it feeds the conflict loop further.

## **Conflict Prevention**

The most effective, and most difficult response to conflict is to use a combination of all the effective Egostates, communicating first from **Free Child**.

Instead of reacting and throwing in a **CP** or **RC** jibe you need to consider carefully how you feel and where you want to get to. The smartest and hardest opening is from **FC** and this is also the most powerful. Telling someone authentically how you feel might not be the cultural norm in your organisation, however this invites the strongest message that you want to interact, differently, honestly and move towards resolution. It's an act of leadership.

Some people find FC statements quite easy: they can describe emotions and do not see this as making themselves vulnerable. Others struggle with this. FC statements use 'I' and clearly state how a feeling such as "I'm pleased / concerned / frustrated / disappointed / fed up" etc (see the emotional language on page 16). They attract either a FC or a NP response in someone else so from the outset you are interacting on a path of honesty and mutual respect and interest.

The next stage of the process demands specificity. Often people receive negative feedback but don't understand why. After FC comes the explanation for why you feel the way you do - "I feel frustrated as you were two days late with that report". This asks someone to respond with their version of the facts.

And finally, asking someone their understanding, for their version of events allows the two stories and points of views to be considered side by side.

I feel (FC)\_\_\_\_ because (A) \_\_\_\_ what is your understanding of what has happened here (NP) \_\_\_\_?

This sequence of Egostate behaviour stands the best chance of getting more of the same from the other person. The challenge from is to keep repeating the sequence as you listen to and comment on the response (FC and A) and deepen the dialogue and understanding (NP). Through this powerful sequence a greater understanding is formed about the nature of the conflict, the different understandings and reasons for these.

*It's not about people being nice to each other -  
its about being effective.*

When we perceive we are not being judged, we are more likely to be creative and innovative. Using this sequence we are more likely to understand each other's issues and reach collaborative often unexpected resolutions.

## The Inner Dialogue of Leaders

### INEFFECTIVE

We all know that we can be our own best friend - and our own worst enemy! The language of Ego States is useful in identifying the internal thought patterns and conversations that might get in your way.

**Critical Parent** is the state you're in when you beat yourself up. Under pressure you might notice your inner voice telling you that you should have done things better, smarter - that you screwed up. Of course, we can all live with a degree of self criticism - we're talking here about the extent of it and being prepared to challenge it - asking yourself whether its really necessary and helpful.

**Compliant Child** is the state you are in when you keep quiet, bottle things up or play safe. Once again, sometimes those things are sensible behaviours if you've actively chosen to do them for a good reason (**Adult**). Sometimes though we behave that way out of an anxiety that might be perception rather than fact. Sometimes we are in compliance to our own inner **Critical Parent** telling us that we're not as good as others and so should keep quiet.

When you want to pack things in, give up, or mentally turn your back on something, that's the **Rebellious Child** state at work. It's caused by the build up of unacknowledged emotion - the principle being that if we don't acknowledge our emotions from **Free Child** - they'll leak out somewhere - they always do.

Too much of your inner life in the Red States saps your energy, drains your confidence, causes stress and keeps you in the bottom of the change curve.

### EFFECTIVE

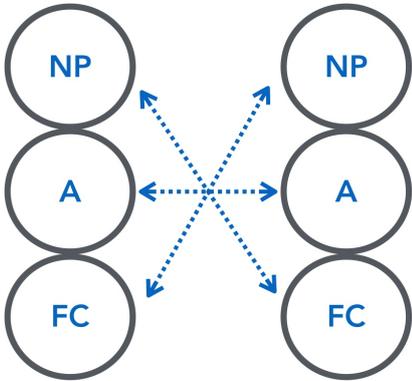
Far more effective than beating yourself up is to engage your internal **Nurturing Parent** state to ask yourself how you're doing. Taking a few deep breaths in a busy day helps to override the brain's threat system and automatic 'old' responses - it's a very simple way to help you engage that part of your own psychology that is enquiring, curious and generous towards yourself and others.

The power of engaging internal **Nurturing Parent** is that it helps the brain separate out your emotions from your logic - freeing you up to manage both. Managing the emotion helps you to fully access your own thinking, to weigh up the risks and benefits of decisions you're making.

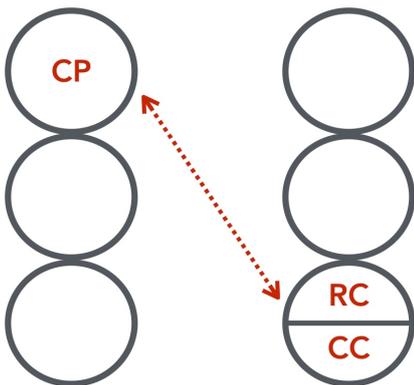
Remember the last time you had fun? Well then, you know the power of what the model calls **Free Child**. It is particularly important in times of change to do things that tap into that part of you that has humour, is creative, enjoys making or even breaking things! We often lose sight of it because it seems trivial in the face of the challenges we face. It turns out though that it is usually infectious and energising and highly appreciated by those around us.

Equally, **Free Child** is about acknowledging negative as well as positive emotions. The brain does not work well when we suppress negative emotions but nor do we want to constantly pick at them or re-live them. The skill is to acknowledge their presence - to recognise their existence, label them if you can but then move on. Once they are labelled you can then decide what course of action to take. To create a foundation of trust sometimes this may include sharing what's important to you, what your concerns are, what motivates and upsets you.

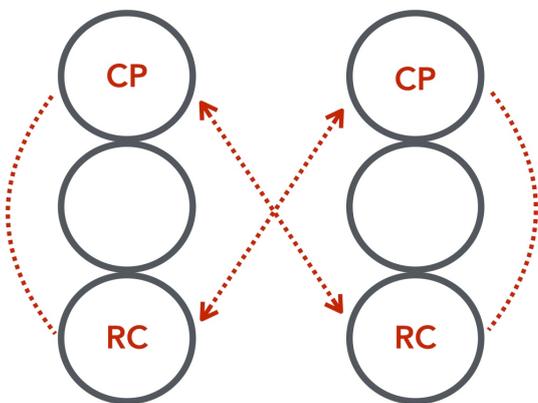
## Summary



People perform at their best when they can fully access the part of them that thinks logically (A), the part of them that has motivational energy (FC) and the part of them that appreciates the perspectives and needs of others (NP). Blue States create the context that enable the Four Gears principles to grow.



When people perceive threat (CP) they find it harder to access their own logic, their real emotion or their empathy for the other person. Red States undermine the Four Gears principles.



Red states attract each other and can easily create conflict loops between individuals or different groups.