

Stop the Drama

Coaching Teams Out of Psychological Games

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OPENING

Picture a room.

A slightly-too-warm meeting room. The sprint retrospective started ten minutes ago. Sarah, the Scrum Master, has a marker in hand. The whiteboard has last sprint's velocity on it.

She hasn't written anything useful yet.

DEV A

"We keep missing sprint goals because the PO changes priorities mid-sprint."

SARAH (SM)

"Have you tried a sprint goal that's more resilient to change?"

DEV A

*"Yes, **but** the stakeholders just add new requirements anyway."*

THE PATTERN

Three suggestions later...

- 1 **Suggestion 1:** "Have you tried a more resilient sprint goal?" → Yes, but...
- 2 **Suggestion 2:** "Bring the PO into planning earlier?" → Yes, but...
- 3 **Suggestion 3:** "A 48-hour change freeze after planning?" → Yes, but...

By suggestion three, Sarah is no longer trying to solve the problem.
She is trying to end **her own discomfort**.

THE INSIGHT

*"This is not a **bad day**.*

*This is a **pattern**.*

And patterns have structure."

Once you can see the structure, you can do something about it.

PATTERN RECOGNITION

Three signals you're in a pattern

1 The same conversation keeps repeating
Different words. Different meeting. Same emotional landing.

2 "Here we go again"
You catch yourself thinking it before the sentence is even finished.

3 People leave feeling worse
Nothing resolved. No one accountable. A new Post-it color, same items.

SECTION 1

The Drama Triangle & Four Games

Stephen Karpman, 1968. Three roles, one rotation. That rotation is the game.

01

The Drama Triangle

● RESCUER

The most **caring person** in the room. Enters because they genuinely believe they can help.

PAYOFF

Indispensability. "The team needs me."

● VICTIM

Convinced the situation is **impossible** . Every rejected solution confirms the story.

PAYOFF

Proof of helplessness. "I was right to feel trapped."

● PERSECUTOR

Believes they are being **honest or direct** . No one self-identifies with this role.

PAYOFF

Rightness. "I see clearly and others don't."

ROLES ROTATE

Roles switch mid-game — that's what makes it a **game**, not just a bad day.

GAME 1

Why Don't You / Yes, But

HOW IT RUNS

Problem raised. Solution offered. "Yes, but..." Another solution. "Yes, but..." Three suggestions in, the helper gives up. Next retro: same problem, new Post-it color.

TELL-SIGNS

Serial "Yes, but..." · Helper works harder than problem-owner · Problem stays on the board indefinitely

PAYOFFS

Victim: Every rejected solution confirms "this is unsolvable."

Rescuer: "I tried. They won't listen. What more can I do?"

BREAK IT

Stop advising. Start asking for **ownership**.

"What do you want to try? By when?"

GAME 2

I'm Only Trying to Help You

FOR SCRUM MASTERS & COACHES

You care. You have three ideas ready before you walk in. Nobody asked. You offer them anyway. Six months later: "I'm the only one who gives a damn."

WARNING LINE

If you are working **harder on the team's problem than the team is** — you might be playing this game.

TELL-SIGNS

Chronic unsolicited help · Politely received, never acted on · "I'm only trying to help" in your internal monologue

BREAK IT

Ask **permission** before offering anything.

"Do you want ideas, or a listener right now?"

GAME 3

If It Weren't For You

THE ABSENT PERSECUTOR

Blocked by the platform team for **six sprints** . Every retro: "They never respond." In six sprints, the team never once got on a call. The absent Persecutor is never in the room — which is exactly the point.

PAYOFF

Release from accountability. **"It's not our fault. We're helpless against the system."** The whole team bonds over shared injustice.

TELL-SIGNS

Constraints named, never worked with · "We'd be fine if it weren't for..." · Angry resistance when redirected to what's in the team's control

BREAK IT

"What can we control? What can we influence? What do we need to accept?"

Even if everything you say about them is true — what will we do?

GAME 4

Ain't It Awful

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Ten minutes in. Energy is high. People are animated. Nobody has proposed one action item. Everyone is talking and the talking **feels good**. This is not a retro — **this is bonding**.

COLLUSION DANGER

It *feels* like psychological safety. It is not. It is **shared helplessness** with good facilitation.

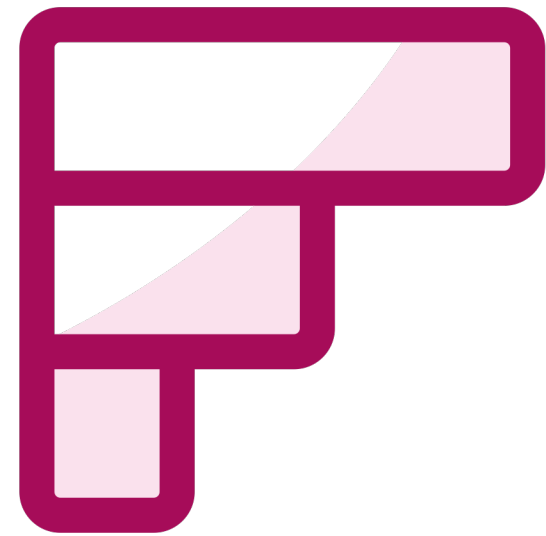
TELL-SIGNS

Looping complaints that escalate · "Nothing works around here" as a stable conclusion · Solutions dismissed with a laugh

BREAK IT

Validate, then pivot. Timebox the venting.

"Five minutes to vent — then: what's one thing we can change?"



Rank your 'favourite' games!

DIAGNOSTIC

Five signals you're in a game

- 1 The **same conversation keeps repeating**. Different words, same emotional ending.
- 2 You notice a **switch**. Someone helpful starts to sound like they're blaming. The temperature changes without following from what was just said.
- 3 **Energy drains** from the room — not through boredom, through something heavier.
- 4 People leave feeling **worse** — more certain that things don't change, that effort isn't worth it.
- 5 "Here we go again" — before the sentence is finished.

The **switch moment** is your strongest signal. Catch the switch, interrupt the game.

SECTION 2

BART Why the System Invites Drama

Games don't happen because people are broken.

They happen because the system is **under-specified**.

02

DIAGNOSTIC FRAMEWORK

BART — Four questions before you decide it's a people problem

B

Boundaries

WHO'S IN? WHAT'S IN SCOPE?

Work entering through side doors → fuel for "If It Weren't For You."

A

Authority

WHO DECIDES WHAT?

"Empowerment" without clarity produces anxiety, not freedom.

R

Roles

WHO DOES WHAT?

If formal roles are unclear, hidden roles run the team.

T

Task

WHAT ARE WE HERE TO ACHIEVE?

The green-dashboard problem: activity without purpose.

If BART is fuzzy, games will fill the gap. They always do.

BART — ROLES

The four hidden roles that run every team

The Final Voice

Whose judgment closes debate — regardless of title. Nobody assigned this role.

The Peacekeeper

Absorbs tension to protect harmony — often at significant personal cost.

The Scapegoat

Carries the team's anxiety. Frustrations land here.

The Martyr

Takes on work that belongs to others. Keeps the system stable. Quietly resents it.

— Ask not only *"who has the role?"* but **"what role is the system rewarding?"**

One sprint planning, four BART failures

BOUNDARY BROKEN

Stakeholders message developers directly. Work enters through side doors.

AUTHORITY UNCLEAR

The lead engineer becomes the de facto final voice. Nobody assigned this. Nobody asked.

ROLE UNCLEAR

PO hesitates to say no — it's never been clear whether she has that authority.

TASK UNCLEAR

Sprint goal: "Complete the stories in the blue column." Activity, not purpose.

The meeting sounds busy and reasonable. The team leaves **vaguely uneasy but unable to name why** .

Two sprints later, the same frustration returns.

Low ownership is often an output of the **system**, not a personality trait.

SECTION 3

Exit-Ramp Language

What do you actually say ? In the room. Right now. While the spiral is happening and you have four seconds.

03

The same arc — every game, every room

1 Acknowledge

Name the feeling **without joining it**. "I hear the frustration" ≠ "you're right, it's awful."

You are a *witness* to the feeling, not a participant in it. Dismiss it and the room pushes back twice as hard.

2 Redirect to Agency

Move from "**what's wrong**" to "**what belongs to us.**" Not a pivot away from the problem — a pivot toward what the team can actually do.

Land this gently, or it reads as dismissing the feeling you just acknowledged.

3 Return Decision Rights

Put choice back in the team's hands. "**What would you propose?**" The moment you hand back the decision, you hand back the accountability.

Not solving for them. Not dismissing. Returning it — with the implication they are capable.

The order matters. You can't redirect before you acknowledge.

EXIT-RAMP LANGUAGE

The phrase cheat sheet

WYDYB

"What would work, even partially?"

IOTHY

"Do you want ideas, or a listener right now?"

IFWFY

"What part of this is within our control?"

AIA

"Five minutes to vent — then: what can we change?"

UNIVERSAL — ANY GAME

"What's the smallest safe experiment we're genuinely willing to try?"

LIVE WALKTHROUGH

Sarah does something different

BEFORE — THE RESCUER

Sarah offers a third solution. Dev A says "Yes, but management would never go for that." Sarah tries again. She is working harder on this conversation than Dev A and Dev B combined.

The retro ends. Nothing is owned. Same items, new Post-it color.

AFTER — THE EXIT RAMP

"I hear the frustration — this keeps coming up. Let me ask differently: what boundary would need to exist so that mid-sprint changes have a real cost? What would you propose?"

- ✓ Acknowledged the feeling — didn't join it
- ✓ Redirected to structure, not personality
- ✓ Returned decision rights to the team

She stopped working harder on their problem than they were. She put the problem back **where it belongs**.

Three things it never does

✗ Names the game to the team

Don't say "you're playing Yes, But" in the room. That **shames** . Shame escalates — it does not resolve. Name the pattern in supervision, in your notes, not in the room.

✗ Solves the problem for the team

That's the Rescuer entering. If you come out of the exchange holding the action item, you've rescued — not coached. The exit ramp returns the problem, it doesn't absorb it.

✗ Dismisses the feeling

"Let's try to be constructive" is a dismissal. The person must feel **heard** before you move them. Acknowledge, then redirect — always in that order.

SECTION 4

The Self-Management Loop

Exit-ramp language only works if you're **not inside the triangle** when you use it.

The words can be right and the delivery can betray everything.

SELF-AWARENESS

Three ways we enter the triangle

RESCUER ENTRY

We prepare more. We care more. We stayed late. We have the answer ready before we walk in. The tell: the over-preparation, the urgency, the sinking feeling when the team doesn't pick it up.

It starts with *caring* . Which is why it's hard to name.

PERSECUTOR ENTRY

"That team is impossible. The PO just doesn't get it." We thought we were venting. We were playing. The moment we stopped being curious and started narrating evidence of their failure.

Starts as a quiet story we tell ourselves.

Shapes how we walk into the next session.

VICTIM ENTRY

We feel helpless. Nothing we do makes a difference. We stop pushing back. We facilitate the retro and go home thinking "what's the point."

More common among experienced coaches than we admit. It comes *after* the Rescuer phase.

COLLUSION

*"It starts as **empathy** . You understand their frustration. You nod. One day you nod too enthusiastically. You add context. You become the one who **really gets it** .*

Allies don't challenge. They validate. And the moment you stop challenging — you are no longer their coach."

You are participant number seven in the Ain't It Awful circle — with a certification.

THE SELF-MANAGEMENT LOOP

PAUSE → REFLECT → ACT

PAUSE

Notice the pull **before you act on it** .

Body signals come first: tension, urgency, restlessness. Thought signals follow: "I should just tell them." Those thoughts are the sound of a role calling.

You don't have to act on them.

REFLECT

1. Whose problem is this, really?
2. What do I want right now — is that about them or me?
3. Which Drama Triangle role is this situation pulling me toward?

Name it silently. That naming is the moment you have a choice.

ACT

From outside the triangle, choose a response.

- Use an exit ramp
- Return the decision: *"What do you want to do?"*
- Let the silence work. A well-placed pause is a legitimate coaching move.

THE 30-SECOND VERSION

When you don't have time for the full loop — when you're in the room and the spiral is happening:

Stop.

One breath.

What role is this situation pulling me toward?

What would I do if I weren't in that role?

Two questions and one breath. Enough to interrupt the automatic response.

ANCHOR PHRASE

*"My job is to **widen the team's options** — not to narrow them by becoming a **character in their story** ."*

Keep this somewhere visible before difficult sessions.

RE-IMPRINTING

When the pattern breaks — say it out loud

Every successful repair imprints the belief that **we can handle it** .
That shift sustains the change long after the coach leaves.

EXAMPLE

"I want to name something. Two weeks ago, this same situation caused a three-day argument. This week, you handled it in eight minutes."

Not because the team needs praise — because they need to know **what they look like when they're working**.

Old belief: "**We fall apart under pressure.**"

New belief: "**We handle surprises calmly.**"

Named clearly and specifically, the moment becomes the new normal.

THE COMPLETE SEQUENCE

Next time you feel "here we go again"

1

Spot the game

Recognize it inside yourself. Someone's working harder on this than the person who owns it.

3

Check yourself

Which role is pulling you toward the triangle? One breath. Name it.

5

Repair if needed

Name the drift. Restate the agreement. Recommit jointly.

2

Check BART

Fast internal diagnostic. Which structural element is fuzzy right now?

4

Use an exit ramp

Acknowledge → Redirect → Return. The stance matters more than the phrase.

6

Re-imprint what worked

When the pattern breaks, even once — say it out loud.

ONE THING TO TRY BEFORE YOUR NEXT SPRINT

Pick **one repeating conversation** .

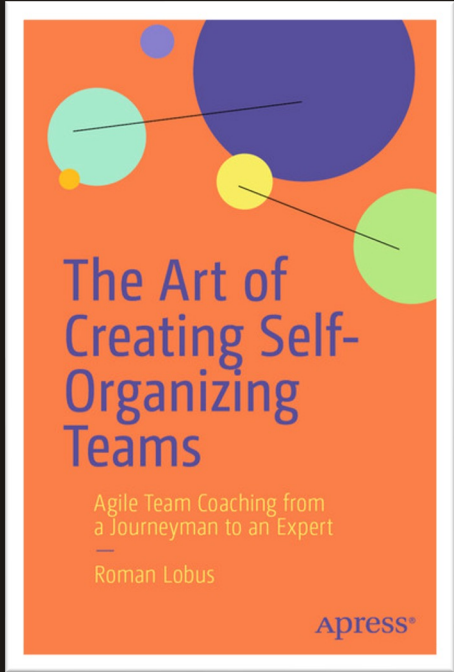
Write down: what game is this? Which BART element is fuzzy?

What exit-ramp phrase will you use when it surfaces again?

Teams don't stall because they forgot Scrum.

*They stall because of **invisible patterns**.*

Now you can see them.



The Art of Creating Self-Organizing Teams
selforganizing.team



Slides & Additional Resources
selforganizing.team/gsg-2026