Introduction
Understanding how people interact is an important part of effective leadership. **Transactional analysis** splits responses into three groups: people responding as an adult, child or parent. It is a simple yet accurate means of situating our own behaviour patterns within the wider context of human interaction.

Transactional analysis was developed by Eric Berne in the 1960s.¹ It is based on two key assumptions:

- How we act is determined by sets of behaviours and emotional responses which we have learnt at various stages of our lives and which we continue to use habitually, whether or not they remain relevant or appropriate.

- Once made aware of these behaviours, it is possible to modify and control them in a productive manner. We can help others to modify their behaviours too.

To explain these assumptions more readily, Berne originated a model of human behaviour that he described using the concepts of parent, adult and child. How they differ is summarised below:

![Transactional Analysis Model](image)

**Parent**
A dominating role, in which authority and the wish to act protectively towards others are the keynotes. The main points about the parent ego state are as follows.

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• It is a taught aspect of personality, which consists of opinion, attitudes and behaviours, which have been recorded in the brain from early infancy.

• There are two kinds of parent state: the nurturing parent and the controlling parent. Highly supportive and protective, the nurturing parent has a broadly positive impact on their ‘child’, although this also results in a stifling atmosphere which retards development. The nurturing parent will offer words of encouragement and regularly offer assistance. Nurturing parents use positive moral statements to guide behaviour, e.g. “try your best”, “work hard” or “don’t go to bed late”.

• By contrast, the controlling parent sets rules, expects them to followed, and is highly judgemental about their child’s behaviour. The controlling parent will justify these rules using moral absolutes which the child is ordered not to violate, whatever the circumstances.

Both types of parent use physical self-expression to underline their verbal communication. This may take the form of encouraging smiles from the nurturing parent and intimidating frowns from the controlling parent.

**Adult**

An evaluative, rational, objective role, in which reasoning and mental capabilities are used to assess the individual’s surroundings in order to tackle problems and take decisions. The main points about the adult ego state are as follows:

• The adult ego state is the thinking part of personality.

• There are three basic functions:
  • information collecting and processing
  • reality testing
  • probability estimating

• The behavioural characteristics of the adult state are cool, unemotional, organised, objective, adaptable, rational and intelligent.

• It acts as a computer data bank for the personality, sifting recordings and selecting appropriate behaviour responses from Adult, Parent and Child in order to reach a decision.

**Child**

An emotional role, in which feelings, intuition, creativity and imagination play a major part. The main points about the child ego state are:

• It represents the felt aspect of personality, including recordings of feelings and emotions and the reactions to them.

• There are two types of child:
  • **Natural or free child** – characterised by a lack of inhibition, the natural child is also highly attention-seeking and egocentric, often feeling the need for
instant gratification. Natural children are often highly inquisitive, curious and creative.

- **Adapted child** – this is the natural child who has learnt how to behave in the adult world, using procrastination, withdrawal or compliance to avoid fully engaging with adult realities. Often compliance is accompanied with an attempt to get what the child really wants without breaking the parental or adult rules which it feels it should follow. So an adapted child might circumvent a request for no smoking in the office by sticking their head out of the window and smoking that way.

Berne argued that our personality will be a mixture of the three ego states. For some individuals this will be a fairly even mix, but for others one or two of the ego states could dominate. The exact mix of the ego states will depend on which are dominant and on the recordings retained in our brain from earlier in our life.

**Complementary Transactions**

Because of the mixture of states, all communication in adult life involves a transaction between identical states (e.g. adult to adult) or two different states (e.g. parent to child). Most of the time, a person’s adoption of one state will encourage the other person to adopt a complementary one. Two examples of this are as follows:

**Adult to Adult**

A: When is the meeting scheduled for?

B: 9am.

**Adult to Child to Parent**

A: When is the meeting scheduled for?

B: 9am. But I’m worried that the discussion will get too heated.

A: Oh, don’t worry – I’m sure it will all get resolved by the end.

The first example represents a simple adult to adult transaction. It can be represented visually, as shown below. In this example, the transaction is a complementary one, as demonstrated by the parallel lines.
In the second example, Parent to Child, the adult role quickly shifts to a parental one in reply to a child-like response. Once again, the lines remain parallel.
**Crossed Transactions**

Sometimes, however, an individual responds in such a way as to disrupt the anticipated order. For instance in the following example:

A: Could you let me have the time, please?
B: Why don’t you go and buy your own watch?

Visually, such a transaction is represented using crossed lines in place of parallel ones.

A: What time do you call this, then?
B: Hey, I arrive when I want. And anyway, you’re a fine one to talk. Why don’t you remind me what time you arrived here yesterday?

They result in stalemate until one party switches their response to a complementary one. Another example of this is as follows:

A: Could you let me have the time, please?
B: Why don’t you go and buy your own watch?
Angular (ulterior) transactions

The third kind of interaction is one where what is actually spoken serves to mask the true content of the conversation which remains unspoken. It is a hidden, implied or ulterior message which is transmitted via the more conventional vehicle of a seemingly complementary transaction. Thus:

A: Glad you could make it [Where the hell have you been? – Parent]
B: Thanks [I’m really sorry I’m so late – Child]

or

A: I see you finished that work that we were asked to do [I wanted to do that work myself – Child].
B: Yes – I thought I’d do a good job [Yes, well I knew I’d do a better job on it than you would have – Child].

The second example might be demonstrated visually as follows:

Being aware of how these different states interact, and how to manage one’s behaviour accordingly, is a highly useful leadership skill.