HR Director Boardroom Summary

June 2025

Speakers:

Simon Rice-Birchall
Partner
Eversheds Sutherland

Nicola Forbes-Taylor
HR & Leadership Consultant
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Discussing the topic:
'HR Jedi Moves: Ditching Drama and Mastering SLT Conflict'

On 24th June, senior HR leaders gathered for a high-impact session focused on an increasingly prevalent challenge: managing unproductive conflict and dysfunction at senior leadership level. Delivered in partnership between legal expert Simon Rice-Birchall and HR thought leader and executive coach Nicola Forbes-Taylor, the session provided a practical and thought-provoking exploration into the emotional, behavioural, and legal roots of SLT conflict and how HR can lead the shift from drama to empowerment.

The Human Cost of Leadership Conflict
Nicola opened the session by sharing her personal experiences as a former Chief People Officer and executive coach. Drawing from over a decade in senior roles, she spoke candidly about how even the most capable leaders can get pulled into reactive, conflict-driven dynamics especially under pressure. The key issue, she noted, is not always a lack of capability but rather a lack of self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Understanding the Drama Triangle
Central to the discussion was Karpman's Drama Triangle, a social model of human interaction that highlights the unconscious mindsets and "personas" people can take on during conflict that drive cyclical behaviours:
- Victim – feels powerless, mistreated, or overwhelmed
- Persecutor – acts controlling, critical, or dominant
- Rescuer – tries to "fix" problems, often without being asked

These are not positions or permanent roles, rather than mindsets that drive behaviours and cyclical interaction patterns. A Rescuer mindset in someone who feels unappreciated may shift into Victim mode, as they thrive on being needed and appreciated. A Victim mindset in someone who feels ignored may morph into Persecutor behaviours. In high-pressure environments like executive teams, these roles often play out repeatedly unnoticed and unchecked.

Why Drama at the Top Is a Business Risk
The group examined common signs that the Drama Triangle may be active within SLTs, including:
- Circular conversations with no resolution
- Dominant individuals monopolising meetings
- Delayed or undermined decision-making
- Frequent HR escalation for issues that should be resolved by leaders
- Disengagement or quiet exits from high performers

Nicola emphasised that while these behaviours can appear to be part of leadership dynamics, they are often symptoms of dysfunctional patterns that erode trust, waste time, and damage organisational culture.

She noted that HR can be frequently cast as the default Rescuer tasked with resolving conflict without enabling the individuals involved to take accountability. Nicola challenged this tendency, encouraging HR to shift away from rescuing and instead coach leaders toward greater ownership and awareness of impact and possibility of changing approach (and thereby, impact).

Legal and Commercial Consequences
Simon brought a legal lens to the conversation, warning that unresolved SLT conflict is not only a cultural issue but a serious commercial risk. When left unaddressed, these dynamics can lead to:

- Long-term sickness absence
- Formal grievances
- Discrimination or dismissal claims
- Constructive dismissal or victimisation allegations

Simon was unequivocal: "If lawyers are involved, the situation is already broken. It's rarely repairable at that point and it's expensive." He urged HR to recognise early warning signs of psychological harm and organisational dysfunction before issues escalate into legal territory.

Participants reflected on how these dynamics show up in their organisations particularly in environments lacking psychological safety or where dominant voices go unchallenged. In such cases, conflict is often avoided, and HR is relied upon to step in rather than leaders being held accountable.

Moving from Drama to Empowerment
To move beyond the Drama Triangle, Nicola introduced David Emerald's Empowerment Dynamic, a reframed model that replaces reactive roles with more constructive ones:

- Victim → Creator – takes ownership of outcomes
- Persecutor → Challenger – provides honest, constructive feedback
- Rescuer → Coach – supports others to solve their own problems

This transformation, she explained, begins with self-awareness and a conscious choice to operate differently. HR has a key role to play coaching SLTs to spot when they've fallen into reactive roles and guiding them to adopt more empowering ones.

Nicola reminded attendees that sustainable change starts with HR modelling the behaviours they want to embed. This means resisting the urge to intervene too quickly and instead building the capacity of leadership teams to be more self-aware, emotionally intelligent, and resilient.

Reflection and Action
The session included time for personal reflection, prompting HR leaders to ask themselves:

- What role do I typically play when drama arises?
- Am I defaulting to rescue rather than enabling ownership?
- What's one action I can take to encourage empowerment in my leadership team?

Practical Takeaways
Attendees left with a range of actionable ideas, including:

- Embedding regular coaching within SLTs, even when it feels uncomfortable
- Running workshops focused on psychological safety, feedback, and trust
- Designing bespoke leadership development programmes rather than relying on off-the-shelf solutions
- Reframing HR's role from fixer to enabler
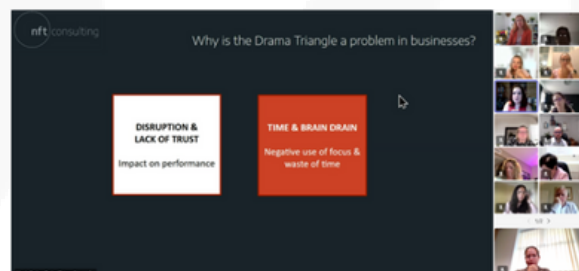
Final Thoughts
As the session drew to a close, Nicola offered a powerful reminder: real progress takes time, but even small changes can create momentum. When leaders feel seen, heard, and supported with tools, not just solutions they begin to shift. And when they shift, organisations thrive.

Further Support?
If you want further support and development and would like to contact Nicola, reach out on LinkedIn or drop her an email.

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Contact us

If you're looking for a new recruitment opportunity or want to find out more about what our Group can offer, please get in touch.

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