



Resilient Leadership

A New Way of... ▲ Seeing ▲ Thinking ▲ Leading

Triangles

The triangle is a practical tool for understanding the emotional dynamics that operate at the most basic level in any organization. Understanding how emotional triangles operate equips leaders with a key resource for managing their own reactivity, calming the anxiety within their organization, and calling forth the best from those they lead.

RE-CAP

Triangles are the basic unit of any relationship system.

Recognizing triangles is the first step to protecting against their harmful effects.

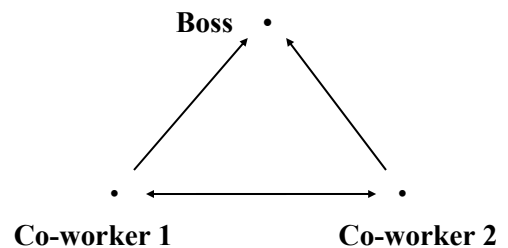
The key is for leaders to stay calm and remain in communication with the other two points of the triangle, without trying to interfere in the dynamic between them.

The Basic Building Block

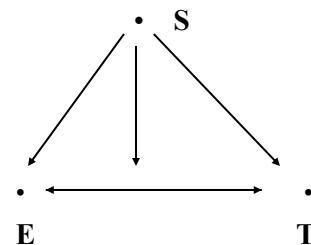
Triangles are the “basic building block” of any emotional system. Anxiety is the natural by-product of the intensity generated in any two-person relationship. By focusing on a third person or any “other” (a group, object, ideology, etc.), a two-person relationship is stabilized and the anxiety is transferred to the other point of the triangle. Triangles are neither good nor bad—they are simply a natural occurrence within any relationship system. The idea is not to try avoiding them altogether, but rather to manage them in healthy ways.

Work Triangles

A familiar example of this phenomenon is found in office gossip: Two co-workers find “common ground” by criticizing their boss, thus relieving them of dealing with any tense elements in their own relationship. The boss becomes the “outsider,” and the other two achieve a feeling of closeness by having “triangled” the boss with their criticism.



Another example of how the dynamics of triangles work can be found in a situation where a supervisor (S) is attempting to get an employee (E) to finish a long-overdue task (T). The “laws” of triangles indicate that focusing



on the E-T axis, the supervisor will only increase resistance by E and absorb the anxiety of the triangle. If, knowing about triangles, S focuses instead on being non-anxious in rela-

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tionship with E and on clearly defining T, the employee is likely to have less resistance and feel more anxiety to get the job done. Leaders who understand how emotional triangles operate are better equipped to deal with workplace reactivity at a level that addresses the organization's basic health.

How to Recognize Triangles

Triangles are natural and ubiquitous. But some are more damaging than others, and recognizing their presence is a first step in defending oneself against their harmful effects. Here are some sure signs that you are caught in the dynamics of an emotional triangle:

- The reactivity directed toward you is disproportionate to the situation.
- You find yourself forming an alliance with a colleague against the colleague's opponent.
- Someone is over-focused on you, apparently without reason.
- You talk to someone about a third party in a negative way that you would not say to his/her face.
- You feel a great deal of responsibility associated with the functioning of another person.

Tips for Leaders

Once you recognize the presence of a triangle in which you are involved, it is possible to think about how you can manage your part of the triangle. You will want to look for ways that will help you calm the system and encourage others to adopt a more thoughtful, less reactive way of functioning. Here are some tips that will help you lead more effectively:

- Ask yourself, "What is my contribution to this triangle? How am I functioning in this relationship?"

- Stay in a calm, thoughtful relationship with each of the other two points of the triangle. Work on how you define your relationship to each of them.

- Avoid any effort to interfere with the dynamic between the other two points of the triangle. Attempts to change their relationship will only reinforce it and result in your absorbing the anxiety between them.

- Maintain a neutral emotional stance toward the other points in the triangle and it will be easier for them to calm their reactivity and return to a more thought-driven way of acting.

- In intense situations, try to remain in the "outside" point of the triangle. By asking questions about observable facts, you are better able to remain in the triangle's outside point.

The Power of Presence

The position that a leader occupies within any organization gives him/her a privileged ability to influence the entire emotional system. By keeping a focus on his or her own functioning, the leader's ability to calm an anxious system is enhanced significantly. Those most likely to be triangled in any system are the ones who are most responsible or most vulnerable. Leaders, by definition, are seen as most responsible, and their position often makes them most vulnerable as well—to criticism, projection, etc.

But being the most triangled person in the system—while it can be burdensome—also means one is in the most powerful position to influence the organization. When a leader is in touch with his or her basic principles, values and vision, it is easier to define "self" in non-anxious ways to the other points of the triangle. This reduces anxiety throughout the system and makes possible more effective leadership.

