

This NOTE was added in January of 2018 (after initial publication): An excellent article on resolving triangulation issues appeared in 2014 in Inc. Magazine. You can access that article here:

<https://www.inc.com/david-van-rooy/triangle-resolve-workplace-conflict.html>

NOTE: The following perspectives were added in February of 2019:

Although triangulation may seem attractive in the short-term, long-term value is gained only if the person with sharable information chooses to deliver the information to the person who can do something about it. The imagined interaction might feel scary, painful, embarrassing, or condemning, but failing to deliver the information to the person directly may very well result in disempowerment or disengagement for one or more of the parties involved:

- the person who never receives the information will likely repeat the behavior; this person is clearly disempowered--and disengaged from the person with the sharable information.
- the uninvolved "third person" who listens to the sharable information perhaps won't feel motivated to go to the person who can do something differently, and even if (s)he does, won't be able to answer specific questions that could lead to improved behavior; this person may feel more disempowered or disengaged than the one who has the sharable information.
- the person with the sharable information is avoiding engagement with the person who might benefit from it; this person may later regret having engaged the third party (perhaps putting that person in an awkward situation); the person with the sharable information may disengage from further contact with either of the other two people because of negative repercussions.

Triangulation--He Said/She Said

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2012, published in the *Savannah Business Journal* on Mon., February 11, 2013

Has anyone ever told you, "Joe (or Mary) has been complaining to me that you have been doing X"?

How did that feel? Were you surprised? Embarrassed? Disappointed? Hurt? Angry?

Now, let's change roles. Have you ever said to a trusted friend, "I'm so frustrated that Joe (or Mary) continues to do X"? Why do you tell your friend instead of telling Joe or Mary? Is your friend a sympathetic listener? Is it harder to confront Joe or Mary than to criticize them to your friend?

Both situations are examples of triangulation. Instead of taking your observations, positive or negative, directly to the person who can do something about them, you go to a third person.

Why do we sometimes engage a third person? The third person represents a surrogate with either power or compassion. Perhaps you think (or hope) that the third person can use his or her influence of position or relationship to stop (or reinforce) the person's existing behavior. Or maybe you want a second opinion, some sympathy, validation of your perspective, or some guidance or encouragement.

You expect to obtain some temporary satisfaction. You'll likely feel better in the short term, being able to safely share your thoughts and feelings. However, avoiding talking with Mary or Joe will not provide the full information you have to share. Something in your relationship prevents you from going directly to Mary or Joe with your sharable information (or prevents Mary or Joe from coming directly to you).

In too many organizations, triangulation is normal behavior. In contrast, healthy organizational cultures foster collaborative, mutually informing dialogue. That is, individuals share what they know (even if it happens to be a bit awkward or uncomfortable) directly with the person who can do something about it. Further, individuals openly invite teammates to share feedback and their perspectives

So, what do you do when a colleague comes to you to complain about someone else? First, listen well. Obviously, the individual trusts you. Honor that trust by attending deeply to the person who wants to share with you. Avoid both fueling the anxiety fire and attempting to douse it. Reflect the feelings as accurately as you can. If you do this well, the person will soon expend his or her emotional energy.

When you sense that point is reached, offer some appropriate compassion. Then calmly ask, "So, what do you intend to do with these observations you have?" Expect a surprised look. The person may have expected you to take up the cause. He may say, "I want you to do something about it!"

Or he may say, "What do you think I should do about it?" Either way, you say, "You have a concern that's worth communicating. Why not go see Joe (or Mary) directly? He (or she) is the only one who can directly benefit from your perspective and potentially do something to improve in the future."

Hopefully, your colleague will pause and think about this option, then stand up, thank you, and head off to find Joe or Mary.

Ah, but what if your colleague balks? You offer, "I'll be happy to go with you to help ensure Mary (or Joe) listens to your concerns." You stand up from your chair and move in the direction of Mary or Joe. You reach out, take your colleague by the arm, and expectantly walk in that direction.

When you arrive, one of you explains in overview why you are there. Support as you can but do a minimum of talking. Let your colleague carry the conversation. Watch to ensure that Mary or Joe is listening for understanding. If not, ask for that consideration on behalf of your colleague.

What if your colleague refuses to talk with Mary or Joe? You politely explain that you will be willing to help when your friend wants to take responsible action to resolve this matter. You refuse to take this problem on as your own, and you decline to consume any more time anguishing over this matter.

Sound harsh? Ironically, it is the most loving thing you can do for your friend and for Mary or Joe.

Let's explore another variation on this triangulation. Suppose a concerned team member comes to you with information about another of your direct reports failing to perform his or her responsibilities. You trust the concerned individual, and the news troubles you. What do you do?

Thank the person, yet reject any desire to protect the company's interests by going to the person and saying, "Joe (or Mary) tells me that you are doing X." If you do, you will have fallen into the "he said/she said" triangulation trap. This weakens your authority and raises conflict among team members. It also communicates to the concerned person that it is okay to avoid directly addressing the situation.

Instead, use the information that Joe or Mary has provided to increase your oversight of the person's performance. As the team leader, you have the right to observe your team members. When you see the offending behavior yourself, you can then confront the person without ever having to reference the person who raised your awareness.

Tolerating triangulation in your organization will diminish the effectiveness of your operation and the satisfaction of your team members. In the most effective teams, information and feedback flow freely between teammates. Use the next opportunity to begin to move your organization in that direction.

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