

Triangulation--He Said/She Said

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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 concerns directly to the person who can do something about them, you go to 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 the offending party's behavior. Or maybe you merely want some sympathy for your plight.

You expect to obtain some temporary satisfaction. You'll likely feel better in the short term, being able to safely share your anxiety. However, avoiding talking with Mary or Joe will not address the underlying problem with them. Something in your relationship prevents you from going directly to Mary or Joe with your concern (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 a little uncomfortable) directly with the person who can do something about it. Further, individuals encourage teammates to share perspectives directly with them.

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 hurting person. Avoid both fueling the anxiety fire and attempting to douse it. Reflect back the feelings as accurately as you can. If you do this well, the person will soon expend his emotional energy.

When you sense that point is reached, offer some appropriate compassion. Then calmly ask, “So, what do you intend to do about the situation?” 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 appropriate one to do something about this situation.”

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, consider asking for that consideration.

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? In reality, 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 employee comes to you with information about another of your direct reports failing to perform his or her responsibilities. You trust the concerned employee, and the news troubles you. What do you do?

Under no circumstances should your desire to protect the company's interests cause you to go to the person and say, "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. Doing this weakens your authority and raises conflict among team members.

Instead, use the information that Joe or Mary has provided to increase your oversight of the person's performance. As the boss, you have the right to observe your employees. 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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