

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) has been doing X, and I'm genuinely surprised it's continuing"?

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 either of 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 instead.

We all do it sometimes. Why? The third person is "safe" and 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.

In seeking a trusted friend, maybe you'll obtain some temporary satisfaction. Perhaps you'll feel better in the short term, able to safely explore your thoughts and feelings--and get some ideas of what else you might do. However, avoiding talking with Mary or Joe won't provide them with the information you have that he or she needs to hear. Something in your relationship prevents you from going directly to Mary or Joe with your shareable information, yet you feel compelled to "get it out."

In too many organizations, triangulation is normal behavior. Once it starts, it can be hard to stop. In contrast, healthy organizational cultures foster collaborative, mutually informed 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. As a leader, openly invite your teammates to share feedback and whatever perspectives they have about you directly with you.

So, what should you do when a colleague comes to you to complain about someone else? First, listen well. The individual trusts you. Honor that trust by attending deeply to the person who wants to share with you. Avoid both attempting to douse the anxiety fire or fueling it. Reflect on 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, in addition to talking with me, what do you intend to do with these observations?" Expect a startled look. The person may have expected you to take up the cause. The response may be "I want you to do something about it!"

Or you might hear "What do you think I should do about it?" Notice that either way, the person is asking you to take up the charge. It is an indication of the person feeling alone and uncomfortable.

Either way, consider saying, "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 potentially do something to improve the circumstances as your relationship continues."

Hopefully, your colleague will pause, most likely in a surprised state, 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? Consider offering, "I'll be happy to go with you to help ensure Mary (or Joe) listens to your concerns." Stand up from your chair and move in the direction of Mary or Joe. Reach out, take your colleague by the arm, and expectantly walk in that direction.

When you arrive, encourage your colleague to provide a summary of 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 to your friend that you will be willing to help when he or she wants to take responsible action to resolve this matter. Refuse to take this problem on as your own and 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 Mary or Joe.

Let's explore another variation of this triangulation. Suppose a concerned team member comes to you with information about one 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, both disclosure and feedback flow freely among teammates. Use the next opportunity to begin to move your organization in that direction.

For additional perspective, please see the article entitled "Disclosure and Feedback--JoHari Window" on my website, www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives

The following NOTES were added after publication.

This excellent article on resolving triangulation issues appeared in 2014 in Inc. magazine:

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

Although triangulation may seem attractive in the short term, long-term value is gained only if the person with sharable information chooses to disclose 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 unfortunately disempowered--and disengaged from the person with the sharable information.
- the uninvolved "third person" who listens to the disclosable 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 disclosable 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. Further, the person with the disclosable situation won't have the experience that will allow her or him to take the proper sharing behavior next time. Stated a different way, you have enabled the person to seek the easier, less effective behavior inappropriately.