

**Briefing Notes:**  
**Dynamics of Triangles**

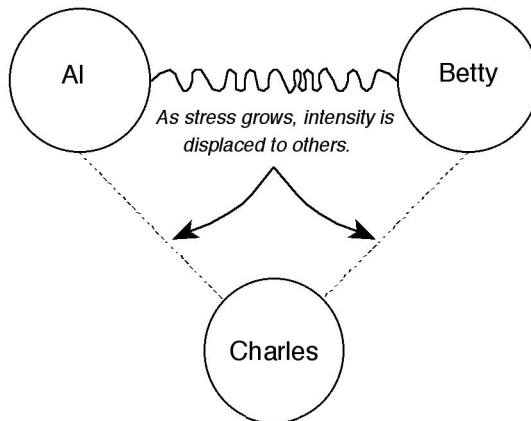
---

Top teams sit on the boundary between a fast-changing wider world and a complex internal organization. One of its leadership roles is absorbing uncertainty and ambiguity and giving good enough guidance for people to focus on their work without being too troubled by the many changes swirling around. A healthy top team is an open system, in touch with many different parts of the internal organization as well as with important external stakeholders. Often key boundaries for the organization to manage effectively are internal to the top team, such as between production and marketing, between research and development and operations, between finance and operations, and so on. All of these dynamics create anxiety that has to be effectively contained by the top team so that the organization does not become gridlocked by dysfunctional splits or coalitions that cannot be openly discussed and worked through.

We know that any two-person relationship under stress will often “triangle” in a third party.

***Anxiety, Triangles, Cliques***

Dyads under stress will “triangle” in a third party or issue to “carry” some of the intensity that cannot be contained in the pair.



There are four typical dysfunctional paths that are used to channel anxiety.

1. **Common Enemy.** A and B suppress/avoid by joining against common enemy C: “We need to stick together to oppose Charles.”
2. **Invoking Support.** A invokes absent C as on my side: “Charles and I think.”
3. **Distancing Self.** A or B distance self from issue and displace it to C: “I’d like to go along, but Charles thinks ...” Or A and B distance selves from responsibility: “If we could only get Charles ...”
4. **Dumping.** A dumps strong but felt to be undiscussable reactions about B in a gossipy, behind-the-back way to C: “Charles, you won’t believe what Betty just did ...”

Sometimes members of a top team will be fighting issues that are displaced upwards from middle managers or vice versa.

Murray Bowen, a family therapist, experienced the power of triangles in his work with disturbed families and has since applied some of these concepts to organizational work. His key insight is to keep the focus in the pair. For each of the above dysfunctional paths, below is listed a response that owns the issue with the pair.

**Dysfunctional Path**

**Reclaiming the Issue**

*Common Enemy*

“I’ve noticed when we begin discussing Charles, it takes us off the hook in exploring and understanding some of our differences.”

*Invoking Support of the Absent Party*

“I’d like the opportunity to talk directly with Charles. Right now I’d like to hear more about your views since Charles isn’t here.”

*Distancing Self*

“Let’s focus on why we [or you] have been so ineffective at influencing Charles because that’s all we can work on at the moment.”

*Dumping*

“What did Betty say when you told her your reactions?” or: “Let’s get Betty in here before we get too far into these issues you [or we] have with her.”

As these examples suggest, the general strategy for managing triangles is to remain related to both parties without discussing the absent third party in destructive ways. By constantly keeping issues in the right channels and blocking detouring maneuvers, a leader can bring considerable health to an organization’s relationship system. For example, a managing partner handled a detoured complaint from one partner about another by cutting short the one complaining, immediately telephoning the third party and saying, “Mr. Brown is in my office with some concerns about your behavior and I thought you should come up here right away so that you can work them out.” In addition to working on the immediate presenting issue, the managing partner sent a clear signal about how he would respond to future attempts to complain to him unconstructively.

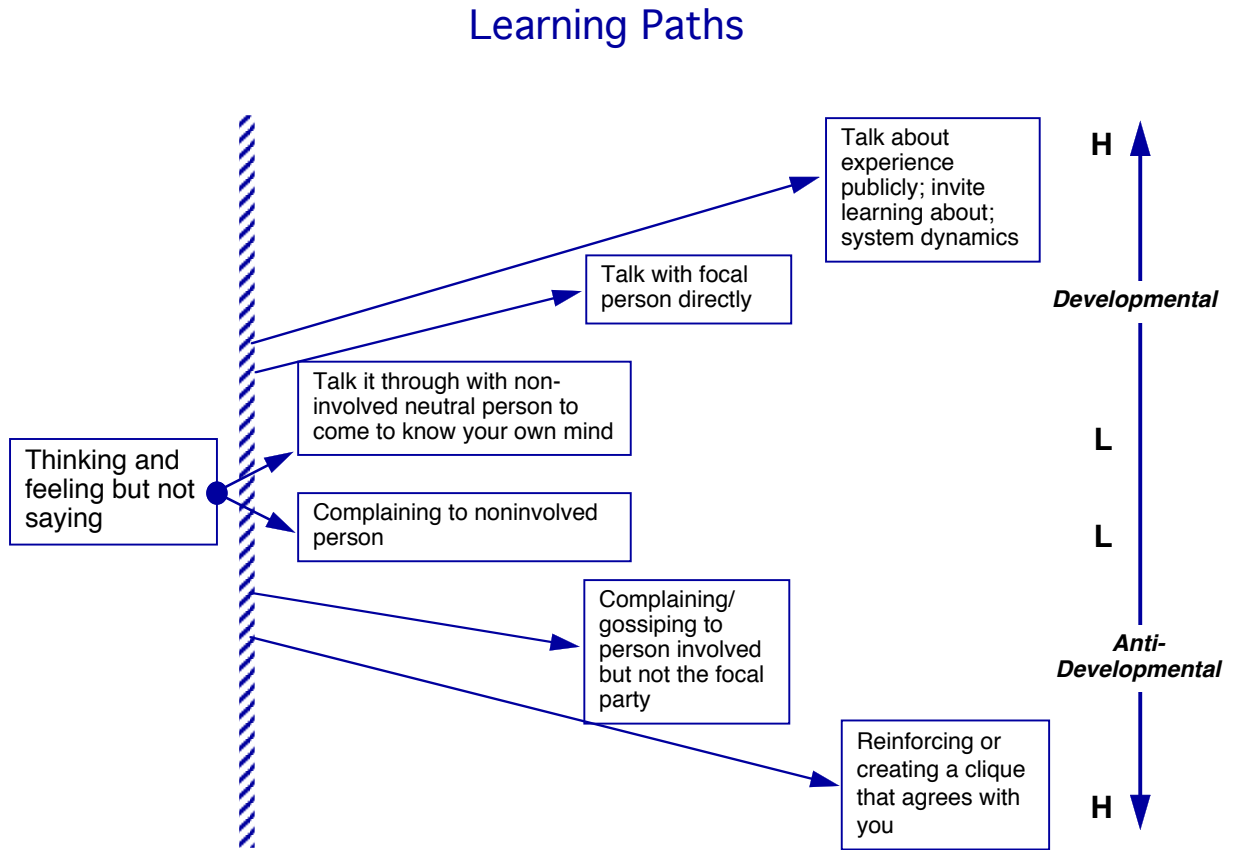
Triangles are particularly important in leadership transitions, such as a new leader, the previous leader and a direct report; or two direct reports and the new leader. Some approaches are the following:

1. Identify the main players in the triangle, in particular the hot leg of the triangle—the one that is carrying a disproportionate amount of the conflict.
2. If you experience an intense dyadic encounter, looking for a potentially under involved third party may shed some light on the dynamics that you are experiencing.
3. Identify the third person that is often in the cool or distant position and benefiting from the deflection of affect. Are there ways to involve that person so that he or she takes a fair share of the issue?
4. Watch for over and under functioning. Who is doing whose work for whom? How is the work of worry distributed? Who carries more than a fair share of worry? It is often easier to throttle down an over functioned than to get an under functioner moving. Often an under functioner will not be motivated until the over functioner stops protecting the other (often unwittingly).
5. Look for ways to stay in contact with the person with whom you are having the most trouble in the triangle. For example, might an out-of-town business trip provide opportunities to relate in a significantly different way? When you experience difficulty, get closer rather than withdrawing.
6. Look for conflicts that are being detoured. Are people getting angry with someone who is less powerful, and therefore less risky to hate, than the real target of their anger?

When triangled by someone complaining about an absent third party, an effective response is to ask, “What did he say when you discussed this with him?” Deliver it in a tone that makes clear it is absolutely expected that the issue has been dealt with directly. When it is acknowledged that no such discussion has occurred, as is usually the case, one can then shift to work with the complainer on finding a way to take up the matter constructively with the appropriate person.

In the end, the most important work in triangles is always the work on the self. Salvatore Minuchin, a well-known family therapist, reacted to a meeting with a foundation executive by saying, “I didn’t like myself when I was with Mr. Smith,” rather than simply locating the problem in Mr. Smith as a person. If one is alive to the ways in which one contributes actively to the process of triangulation, one can gain the necessary perspective and communicate a broader understanding to the other two parties, who in turn will begin to address and resolve their issues between them.

Finally the figure below contrasts developmental and antidevelopmental approaches when you find yourself bottled up with your feelings.



For more information on this or related materials, contact CFAR at [info@cfar.com](mailto:info@cfar.com) or 215.320.3200, or visit our website at <http://www.cfar.com>.