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Are You Guilty of Triangulating on the Job?

When we have disagreements or disappointments at work, we all know that we should address them constructively and as soon as possible with the person with whom we have the conflict. But do we do that? Not usually! Instead, one of our great human failings is that we share those situations with someone other than the person with whom we are upset.

How come?

Because we just want to vent or justify our stand. When we do this, we're engaged in a communication phenomenon called triangulation.

When you triangulate with people at work, you complain about someone without a commitment to resolve the matter directly. Some people refer to this behavior by another name — gossip. Gossiping or triangulating about someone *does not* drive change or allow you to solve the conflict.

Instead, triangulation can drag you, your triangulation “buddy” and your team down because it:

- **Wastes valuable time.** I often suggest that firms create a non-billable charge code for triangulation and encourage their staff to enter the time they spend behind closed doors, whispering in cubicle areas, eye-rolling in meetings and gossiping about peers at lunch into the code to see how much firm time is wasted commiserating about problems with the wrong party (the one who can't solve them!).
- **Reinforces your upset** and can make you more righteous, indignant, upset and entrenched, which sap your mojo, drains your inspiration and creativity and takes you even further away from a reconciliation with your conflict partner.
- **Gets back to the person with whom you have the conflict almost always**, causing them to distrust you and deepen the rift between you. There is a sage adage that when you want to keep a secret, tell no one. When you triangulate, it's like telling everyone.
- **Causes you to risk losing the respect and trust of the person to whom you complain** because they may wonder if you complain about someone else behind their back, maybe you would do the same about your “buddy.”
- **Allows the problem to persist.** When you go to a third-party instead of your conflict partner, you cannot identify the true root cause of your anger or disappointment and generate a lasting solution allowing both of you to move forward.

Most of us do not engage in triangulation to be hurtful or because we think it's okay to gossip. We do it because we don't know how to address the matter with our conflict partner, we're afraid we'll botch the job, hurt their feelings or make the matter worse. What could make the matter worse than when your *behind-the-back* triangulation comes to light instead?

Whenever possible, take your issues directly to your conflict partner because they are the only person with whom you can generate a truly collaborative solution. Recognize that your view, of the situation is not THE ONLY truth — it's YOUR truth — and enter into a dialog that shares your view but invites your conflict partner's view to be shared freely too, so that you can both feel heard and a collaborative solution can be generated with both views on the table.



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If you aren't sure that your expectations of your conflict partner are clear, you might first approach them with the intent to clarify what you both expect. You can start that conversation with something like, "I am not sure that you are aware that ..." or "I wanted to be sure you were aware of the expectation that we ..." or "I have an expectation and I am not sure that I have communicated it or gotten buy-in from you on it ..."

If you know the expectation is clear, you can express disappointment that it hasn't been met by saying, "I expected THIS, but experienced THAT, and wanted to get your input on why that is."

In some cases, you may need to take the issue to your manager because you feel the situation warrants their involvement, you want coaching on how to handle the matter or you have tried unsuccessfully to resolve it with your conflict partner. In such cases, going to your superior is not triangulation because you are committed to driving a resolution and you are seeking guidance to do so. Beware, though, that bringing in a superior before you try to resolve a matter directly can often escalate something simple and further alienate your conflict partner. Be certain that the gravity of the matter calls for this upward input prior to seeking it.

Examine your behavior at work to see where you may be engaged in triangulation, with whom and about whom. Then, tell your triangulation buddy that you realize that you're complaining without commitment to resolve is dragging you both down and ask for their support in stopping this behavior between you. Next, set up a time to meet with your conflict partner to begin rebuilding your relationship. You'll be surprised by how much lighter you will feel when you wean yourself from this behavior and how much more time you'll have to focus on producing positive outcomes at work!

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