

Emotional Process Is Played Out in Triangle

Leslie Ann Fox, MA, RHIA, Patty Thierry Sheridan, MBA, RHIA, CCS

Thank you to Advance Magazine for permission to use this article

Adapting to the new world of work, one in which the use of temporary, remote or outsourced staffing arrangements are common, requires new ways of thinking about workplace relationships. Over the past two months we have discussed the value of increasing our awareness of the workplace as an emotional system. To recap, an “emotional system” is one in which individuals working together, on a regular basis, impact the functioning of one another in ways that operate outside of our awareness. Patterns of automatic behavior, such as conflict, distance, or over- and under-functioning, evolve that are most effective in managing the ebb and flow of anxiety in the workplace. One way to become more aware of the behavioral patterns in the work system is to learn to observe relationship “triangles.”

Anxiety in the System

In “Bowen Family Systems Theory,” triangles are considered the smallest stable unit of functioning. Anxiety in two-person relationships is the most difficult to manage, thus, humans naturally “triangle” with a third person, which helps stabilize the relationship (or manage the anxiety). To demonstrate this point, notice how long you can have a conversation with another person without mentioning a third person. Most people can’t do it for very long.

Three people, who relate to one another as individuals, in open, equal, respectful, non-anxious ways, create a triangle or three-person relationship that can bind more anxiety in a system than any two-person relationship. This may be one reason why using consultants is so popular in the modern world. Consultants come into a system as “emotionally neutral” parties who can triangle with anxious two-party relationships in the organization. The non-anxious presence of the consultant calms the system, thereby helping it to function better.

When anxiety in a system is elevated, one can most readily observe the behavior patterns that are employed to manage it by looking at the triangles. Here is a typical scenario. In a triangle where two parties have a conflict, one of the two tries to move closer to the third person. If the third person takes sides with one party, the other person involved in the conflict is pushed to an outside position in the triangle. The person in the outside position begins to feel alienated, discounted or that the other two are “ganging up” on her, thus, increasing the reactivity in the system. If the person who took sides with one party over the other responds more neutrally, reactivity in the system subsides.

For example, an employee of a health information management (HIM) services company is assigned to an HIM department to help eliminate a backlog in assembly and analysis. The unsuspecting temporary worker can easily get caught up in the emotional process of the department through triangling. Suppose an employee in the department is involved in a conflict with a supervisor or co-worker and enlists the support of the temporary staff person. If the temporary worker sides with her new friend, the conflict may intensify and anxiety in the system rises. However, if the temporary staffer is able to listen calmly and remain neutral, the opportunity for the employee to vent with someone who is neither judgmental, nor fanning the flames, may

reduce the anxiety and resulting conflict.

Managing Your Anxiety

It is not easy for anyone who is being pulled into a triangle to resist the attraction of bonding with a newfound friend or a longtime co-worker. Anxiety is contagious, and togetherness is one way of soothing an anxious mind. The inclination to manage one's own anxiety by joining forces with one or more individuals, at the expense of others in the group, is common. However, when an individual manages his or her own anxiety in a more mature way, the whole group benefits. Some ways that people can better manage themselves in anxious triangles include the following:

- Ask questions to elicit facts rather than feelings, such as, "How many times has she asked you to work overtime?"
- Use the therapeutic "Oh..." and leave it at that, when someone is complaining about another person.
- Make an effort to get closer to both of the other parties in the triangle (i.e., alternate going to lunch with each person).
- When necessary, state your own position, and back it up with facts, not feelings.
- Avoid having a relationship with one person at the expense of another.

Know Thy Own Triangles

Identifying the triangles in your workplace can provide new insights about how anxiety is managed in your organization. Especially useful is to be aware of triangles in which you participate. Learn to observe the affect your own behavior has on the other two participants in the triangle. Try this exercise. Think about your most significant triangle and answer these questions. What is your position in the triangle? Do you stimulate anxious behavior or calm behavior in the other two members of the triangle? Do you tend to side with one party over the other one? Do you try to protect one party from the other? What do you think you could do differently in this triangle that would benefit everyone?

Maybe you can help reduce anxiety in your work setting.

Leslie Ann Fox is president of Care Communications Inc., a national HIM staffing and consulting company with headquarters in Chicago. She invites readers to send their thoughts, questions and opinions on this column via e-mail to lfox@care-communications.com.